

THE INNER LIFE OF THE  
SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME





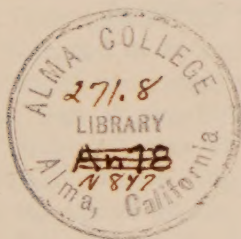


**THE INNER LIFE OF THE SISTERS  
OF NOTRE DAME**





*The Inner Life*  
*of the*  
*Sisters of Notre Dame*



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## PREFACE

BY

HIS GRACE THE MOST REV. ARCHBISHOP GOODIER, S.J.

THERE are many who know the outward work and the outward life of the Sisters of Notre Dame, but not many know their inner spirit. Many who have seen the work they do and the Sisters themselves unceasingly busy about it will have argued to themselves that this could never be unless there were a corresponding life within, giving the outer life its superhuman energy. Many will have studied the Sisters in their going and coming, to find out for themselves the secret of their lives; for many have felt their secret contained an ideal that was worth knowing.

In this little book, *The Inner Life of the Sisters of Notre Dame*, one of their number has given us both that secret and that ideal; and as we read what she has written we feel the truth of the portrait she has drawn. She begins with the note of simplicity, and dwells upon it first of all because it was the characteristic virtue of their Blessed Mother Foundress. Now, whether one studies the life of Blessed Julie Billiart, or merely looks at the ever-smiling features of her authentic portrait, one cannot escape the fascination of this most transparent of her virtues. Blessed Mère Julie was one of those natures that could never have anything underneath. She was always on the surface, always spontaneous, hiding nothing, not even her soul.

When people dealt with her they knew from the beginning that they dealt with her whole and entire, and as a result were fascinated; this was the secret of the village saint alike with rich and poor. To her they were all the same; and in her turn she was the same to them, taken as an equal by them all.

This same selfless simplicity the holy foundress of the Sisters of Notre Dame has left behind for her daughters as their first characteristic; a simplicity that leads to endless generosity, to labour and unconscious sacrifice, to toil that looks for no personal reward; a simplicity that appears, all unknown to itself, in all sorts of ways, in prayer, in life, in conversation, in the very ornaments of its dwelling-places; a simplicity again, which to all alike, to those within its circle and to those outside, is always the same. No one who knows well the Sisters of Notre Dame can fail to notice this whenever he comes across them.

The second trait noticed in this little summary is one which the Sisters of Notre Dame have in common with all other religious from the very nature of their vocation and their vow; nevertheless this virtue, too, they possess in their own special way. To say that the Sisters of Notre Dame were obedient would surely be no striking or distinguishing praise; but to say that their obedience has a feature quite, or almost, its own means something. Were we to be asked what is that peculiar feature we would say it is the perfection of the family spirit. It is not discipline; it is not that military order which is sometimes ascribed to other congregations; it is rather that unconscious sense of due subjection which exists in a child towards a parent. In an institution which has grown so vast, spread as it

is so far and wide, with communities so large, and these often divided into different sections, one has often wondered how this sense of family obedience could be preserved. Yet there it undoubtedly is, reverent yet familiar, subject yet equal, seeing in a superior the representative of God, yet taking her also for a mother. In all this there is something quite its own permeating the atmosphere of a house of Notre Dame.

Nor would it be strange or peculiar to say that the Sisters of Notre Dame are characterised by charity. Please God that quality belongs to all religious, no less than the former two; but again we think it lives in them in its own special way. And that way is the outcome of what we have already seen. It is a simple charity; it is a submissive charity; it is not personally ambitious; it never seeks its own. The prayer of a Sister of Notre Dame does not seek for ecstasy, but it does seek for love; her work, and it is intense, is intense just because it is an outlet for the same; her charity is caught from the Blessed Sacrament and our Lady, expresses itself in her daily life, and in the expression the Sister herself disappears.

It will be said that this is an ideal portrait, but that the reality must fall short of all ideals. In a sense, this is true; even a Sister of Notre Dame is only a human being. Nevertheless one speaks of what one knows and has experienced, and prescindng altogether from any individual, from any special community, one may say that these characteristics are felt in the air by anyone who knows a Notre Dame convent from within. It is a household, a home; its members, with all their gifts and learning—sometimes these should inspire one with awe, but they do not—are the simplest of simple people.

Its obedience, absolute as it is, seems to sit so lightly on the shoulders of its members that it scarcely may be called duty; rather it is love finding in service and sacrifice its natural outlet. We have described no ideal, we have only given an impression; and the impression confirms the ideal given in this account of a Notre Dame Sister's inner life.

Very little knowledge of human nature is required to assure one that such an atmosphere does not come of itself. A Sister of Notre Dame may be holy before she begins—St Aloysius was presumably a Saint before he became a Jesuit—nevertheless, to catch the spirit of her order, she must needs go through a training. The nature of that training is given to us here; it is full of little sidelights on which one is tempted to dilate. But we must pass it over; it is enough to thank God, with the author of this little book, that in that training not one jot or tittle has been relaxed from the primitive observance, nor does it bear less fruit today than it did of old. May the tree bring forth more and more!

Rather we would say a word on the manifest way God has blessed the Institute by the remarkable personalities he has given to it. Of these the author of these pages has given us some instances, selected from England alone; when we look at the list, and read what they have done and meditate on what they have said, we are compelled to say that God has singularly favoured the Sisters of Notre Dame, and that his hand has been with them from the first till now. No one can read the passages here given from the writings and addresses of successive Sisters without feeling the earnestness of life that is behind them; one says to



oneself that where such teaching prevails, the spirit of the whole community is true.

Nor, as we have just hinted, are these honoured names confined to past generations; the author delights, with gratitude to God, to mention those who have been known to many now alive, even many whose lives are but beginning. This has an encouragement all its own. We are tempted to look upon the saints as glorious indeed, but as somewhat distant from us; such a summary as this reveals to us that whether these noble Sisters are or are not to be accounted as saints, yet have they brought true sanctity very near to us indeed. We pass over others whom the present generation cannot have known; but many Sisters there still are who live on the teaching of a great soul like Sister Mary of St Philip, and many thousands today, children of Mount Pleasant, are reaping the fruit of her apostolate. One who reads this little book will be grateful to the author for giving us ample selections from this great soul's instructions and conferences.

There are many more, known to yet younger generations; many mentioned in this little book whose memories linger in the minds of those who owe to them much. They have many noble successors, now alive; may they have more. That they may be increased we feel sure that this author's labour of love will contribute not a little.





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# THE INNER LIFE OF THE SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME

## CHAPTER I

### THE IDEAL—THE FUNDAMENTAL VIRTUE OF SIMPLICITY— EXAMPLE AND TEACHING OF BLESSED JULIE

THIS little book is intended for the use of those who aspire to become perfect Sisters of Notre Dame according to the pattern shown to them by their Foundress, Blessed Julie Billiart. The exterior works of her Institute are well and widely known, having, by God's blessing, increased and multiplied, and borne visible fruit in Belgium, England and Scotland, the United States, California, the Belgian Congo, British South Africa, and Japan. The inner life of the Sisters is hidden from the view not only of those outside their convents, but also to a great extent from the pupils in their schools and colleges. It could scarcely be otherwise when we consider the Ideal set before them on their entrance into the Congregation.

The meaning of the word *ideal* has been extended, by common usage, to indicate a high degree of pleasure or satisfaction presented to the senses, the mind, or the heart. We speak of an ideal landscape, an ideal companion. Sometimes the word is used to denote perfection viewed in the abstract only, and considered as being beyond realisation. In these pages it stands for the concept of a goodness and greatness in human

life that is wonderful indeed, but not unattainable. Certain temperaments are easily led to the formation of a high ideal, but they often lack the courage and constancy needed for its realisation. All who have received the gift of faith, however, can form the highest ideal of Christian perfection and realise it in their lives according to God's design on their individual souls. But they must sincerely pray for his Wisdom to guide their minds, and his Love to inflame their hearts, so that they may see their own particular path and be enabled to pursue it to the end.

The ideal of the Sisters of Notre Dame is expressed by their name. Our Lady in every stage of her life is the type of the perfection towards which they aspire. It is by Mary that they reach Jesus. They look to their Mother to show them how to imitate her Divine Son. As it is set down in their Constitutions: "Having the happiness of bearing the name of Sisters of Notre Dame, they must strive to imitate the virtues of their august Mother."

The soul of every Sister of Notre Dame, then, is meant to be, as far as grace makes it possible, a copy of the pattern of perfection set by Mary. This is the ideal placed before the young girl who aspires to live in its completeness the life of a Sister of Notre Dame. She sees at the outset that she must aim at becoming, not merely a devoted religious teacher or a skilful aid in domestic work, but, in her degree, another "Hand-maid of the Lord." She is destined for a place in the glorious Company of Notre Dame in heaven; and what she has to do on earth is meant by God's Providence to fit her for that place. So she sets herself to study the ideal traced for her in the Rules and Constitutions

of Notre Dame, and she finds that the spirit of the Institute is marked by Simplicity, Obedience and Charity.

A glance at the lives of the first Mothers and Sisters will suffice to show that the simplicity of the Children of God was meant to be the distinguishing mark of the Congregation of Notre Dame. Blessed Julie Billiard, its Foundress, was a peasant girl of Picardy, wonderfully favoured and enlightened by God, it is true, yet, a stranger to the ways of the great ladies from Paris, who came to pass the summer in their country houses near her native village, and who, when the Revolution broke out, sought comfort and courage from the "Saint of Cuvilly," as she was popularly styled. Confined to her bed by paralysis of the lower limbs, she received her visitors and accepted their attentions with perfect simplicity, giving them, with the same simplicity, a share in the spiritual treasures with which her "good God so very good," as she loved to call him, enriched her.

"At that time," writes Père Sellier, S.J., "she was raised to a very high degree of contemplation. She spent in this holy exercise four or five hours every day. At such times she was to be seen perfectly rapt in God—motionless, all use of her senses suspended, and her countenance glowing with heavenly peace and sweetness. The noise made around her was powerless to distract her during these Divine communications." This union of her soul with God was the secret of her simplicity, her absolute forgetfulness of self, her dependence on God alone. One with him in mind and heart, she thought only of pleasing him and promoting his glory; she knew no fear but that of offending him.

Hence, when the Countess Baudoin, one of the ladies who had learned to know and love her, was stricken

to the heart by the loss of her husband and her father, both victims of the Revolution, she turned for consolation to her "bonne Julie," whom she succeeded in bringing to Amiens, where, in the designs of Providence, the future Foundress was to begin her great work. The Countess had taken rooms in the family mansion of the Viscount Blin de Bourdon. Thither Julie was brought, and there she met for the first time Françoise Blin de Bourdon, afterwards Mère St Joseph.

We do not propose to enter here into the details of their meeting and its results. We only wish to note the simplicity which characterised their relations with each other. The one was, as we have said, a poor, unlettered woman, an almost helpless invalid; the other, a high-born lady who had been distinguished at the Court of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, and had found favour with the King's sister, the saintly Madame Elizabeth. But as her nephew well remarked later, "she despised the passing glory of this world for the sake of the glory to come." It was Mère Julie, not Madame Elizabeth of France, who was to become "one heart and one soul" with Mademoiselle Blin de Bourdon. It was their perfect simplicity in seeking only to do the will of God that bound them to each other.

That this was so may be gathered from the letters that were afterwards written by Julie to Françoise, in one of which she says: "Every day at the precious moment of Holy Communion I meet my good friend in our Lord—for I cannot call you otherwise: you know that it is in God and for God that I love you so tenderly. . . . I am quite alone with God. Ask him, oh, ask him to grant me grace to wish for nothing else but this precious treasure—God alone for ever!"



A few years later, the two friends found themselves united as foundation stones of the first little Convent of Notre Dame, in Amiens. There, as the biographer of Mère St Joseph writes: "The frank straightforwardness, dear to the simplicity of Julie's character, marked all their intercourse. Their mutual understanding was so perfect, and the detachment and singleness of intention on either side so genuine that, as religious superior and subject, their relations were as nearly as possible ideal."

The simplicity of these relations still prevails, by the blessing of God, throughout the Congregation of Notre Dame. There is no distinction of Choir and Lay Sister. All alike aim at simple union with God as the essential element of their vocation. All have the same religious training, the same opportunities for cultivating the spirit of prayer: two meditations daily—an hour in the morning, half an hour in the evening; other spiritual exercises made in private or in community. Above all, every Sister has her Mass and her Holy Communion each morning, visit to the Blessed Sacrament or Benediction in the evening. Then all have their Annual Retreat and Monthly Day of Recollection, while the Liturgy of the Church is by all followed with devotion, and the greater Festival Days bring to all the opportunity of passing many hours in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament exposed in the convent chapel. Finally, in the hands of all are placed the instructions on Simplicity given by Blessed Julie to the first Sisters of Notre Dame.

"Simplicity," she said, "is, I think, what Brother Giles once sang to another monk, 'one to One, one to One'—that is, one only soul to one only God. . . The

simple soul is entirely abandoned to the good pleasure of God; she receives the sweet and bitter of life from the Hand, or rather the Heart, of her God, without ever thinking of secondary causes. As the sunflower turns to the sun, so the mind and heart of a nun who possesses this virtue turn always to God, from whom she receives the light of his Wisdom to guide her, and the heat of his Love to sanctify her. . . . In prayer a simple soul speaks to God with easy familiarity, as to her Father and her Spouse. Adoring him with profound humility, she tells him her faults just as she sees them. Then she listens while our Lord communicates himself to her. He tells her his secrets, speaking to her of his Father's glory and his love for souls, and asking her to offer herself as a victim to stand between his justice and sinners. Then the simple soul dares to ask mercy for them through the merits of Jesus Christ. She prays with unbounded confidence to the Father who loves her, and to the Spouse who has given her the right to make use of his treasures. Her holy familiarity does not lessen her wonder or her reverence. On the contrary, no one has a more filial fear of wounding the Heart of her Divine Master than a simple soul thus closely united to her God."

With such glowing, penetrating words as these, Blessed Julie led her daughters straight to God. She urged them to aim only at promoting his glory and helping him to save souls, and to seek nothing for themselves on the part of creatures but forgetfulness and contempt. She would not, however, have the detachment which simplicity implies interpreted as aloofness, or indifference to human needs and weak-

nesses. She affirmed that "a simple soul is sweet-tempered, affectionate, and attentive to the wants of others; has a great love of truth, real humility, and a charming manner. Such a soul is the beloved child of God who finds in her his delight."

"Persons who embrace the religious life in the Institute of Notre Dame," she said on another occasion, "ought to aspire to a high degree of the love of God. They will reach it by trying to acquire the virtue of simplicity. The saints attained perfect love by possessing this virtue in an eminent degree. They had other great virtues, it is true, but if they had not been distinguished by their simplicity they could never have secured salvation. Our Lord gives us to understand this when he says: 'Unless you become as little children, you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven.' Simplicity," she concluded, "has been regarded by saints as a continual act or state of the pure love of God."

She knew, none better, that true love does not consist in sensible fervour or delight; nor is it necessarily, or even ordinarily, marked by visions, raptures, or other extraordinary favours. She received, nevertheless, more than one supernatural indication of God's designs in her regard. Thus it was that she saw in vision at Compiègne our Lord on Mount Calvary surrounded by a group of nuns dressed in the habit which she afterwards gave to the Sisters of Notre Dame. She even distinguished the features of some among them, notably those of the future co-Foundress, Mère St Joseph.

Another memorable ecstasy took place in 1806. It was on that feast, two years before, that Julie and Françoise had together made their profession as Sisters of Notre Dame; and the little Community which had

since then gathered around them were listening intently to the burning words of Mère Julie as she commented upon the mystery of the day. In an outburst of loving gratitude she intoned the canticle of Simeon, when suddenly the Sisters saw her raised above the ground, motionless, her countenance all aglow, and her eyes fixed upon the crucifix. It was afterwards known that in her ecstasy Julie had beheld her Sisters in far-off lands and times, carrying to nations sitting in darkness the light of Revelation.

It was not, therefore, without having had experience of the mystical graces bestowed upon chosen souls that Blessed Julie impressed upon her Sisters the possibility of uniting contemplation with action and of representing, as their Rule expresses it, "at the same time Martha and Mary," of letting their exterior work be permeated, so to speak, by the spirit of prayer.

"Prayer," she would say, "is the exercise and school of love. It is there that the fire is kindled. Saint Teresa was a victim of love, because she was always united to God by prayer. Yet she was not always prostrate before the Blessed Sacrament or at the foot of the Crucifix. Oh no! she had a great deal of work to do. Not only was she a simple nun like us, but like us she had to be busy about many things. She had many labours and many difficulties, but when through necessity she talked with men she was always conversing interiorly with God. It is thus that a good Sister of Notre Dame ought to pray always in spite of the varied occupations of her well-filled day."

In this way the blessed Foundress laid the chief stone on which the whole of her Congregation was to be built—simple union with God by prayer, singleness of mind and heart, "one only soul to one only God."

## CHAPTER II

### THE OBEDIENCE PRACTISED IN THE CONGREGATION—THE SPIRIT OF CHARITY WHICH REIGNS THEREIN

**O**BEDIENCE, the second mark of the true spirit of the Institute, is the logical outcome of the first.

As explained by Blessed Julie, "the virtue of obedience is contained in that of simplicity, for it causes us to see God alone in the person of the Superior who makes known to us his Divine Will. When simplicity has taken deep root in a soul, no change of time or place troubles her, because she loves God so dearly that she cannot help smiling at his good pleasure, however it may be manifested in her regard. A perfectly obedient Sister of Notre Dame is thus the happiest person in the world. She imitates our Lord's entire dependence on his heavenly Father, as shown in his subjection to Mary and Joseph, in his perfect fulfilment of the Law, and his obedience even unto the death of the Cross."

"We must hope," she said, "that in his goodness God will choose saints among us, great and magnanimous souls, souls of martyrs. From these our Lord will ask perhaps through obedience their hands and feet and, if necessary, their hearts also. There is no martyrdom more glorious than that of obedience. It is a sign that God loves a soul very much when he calls upon her to undergo it. A Sister of Notre Dame who has the true spirit of the Institute, who sees by the eyes of faith, who lives in God's presence, knows no diffi-



culty once obedience has spoken; hence she will sing of victory. Such a soul is united to God and easily arranges matters with him. In her prayers she begs the grace to imitate his virtues, but above all his heroism in the simplicity of obedience. In her daily life she sheds over all the Community a delicious perfume, the good odour of Christ, her Divine Spouse. By her perfect submission she is the joy of her superiors; before God she is a perfect holocaust, sacrificing by her obedience the power of her will placed by God under her free control. In doing so she gives the greatest possible glory to God and attains that perfect love which is the entrance to heaven."

Blessed Julie made plain to her daughters that the surest means of arriving in a short time at the perfection of obedience is to desire nothing but the fulfilment of God's Will, to fear nothing but the acting contrary to his good pleasure. She would have them strive earnestly to acquire the virtues of self-abnegation, habitual mortification of the senses, detachment from private opinions and personal views. Then, whatever employment is assigned them, they know that they are doing God's holy will and consequently working for his glory and the salvation of souls. By a spirit of faith they accept or give up whatever is prescribed or prohibited by obedience. "God reigns," she used to say, "in the hearts of those who are truly obedient, and will work miracles in their favour."

Examples are not wanting in the annals of the Institute to prove how faithfully throughout its history the spirit of obedience has been preserved; nor is it impossible to find instances of extraordinary favours granted to Sisters of Notre Dame who have excelled



in the practice of this virtue. Thus we read of Sister Gertrude, the charming and gifted Ciska Steenhaut, how on more than one occasion her blind obedience was miraculously rewarded. In the early days at Amiens she had the care of the Sisters' wardrobe. On one occasion Blessed Mère Julie told her to make a new habit for a Sister. She represented that the only material she had was a piece of white serge. "Go and look again," said the Blessed Julie, "and you will find black stuff." Sister Gertrude obeyed with perfect confidence, and found that the piece of white serge had been miraculously changed into black. When apprised of the fact, Blessed Julie showed no surprise, but said quietly, "Make haste with the habit."

On the other hand, the Foundress let it be clearly understood that she would never have any faith in the virtue of a Sister of Notre Dame who, while not practising obedience perfectly, should appear to be working miracles. "By the Vow of Obedience," she said, "we promise God to have and to do no other will but his, always made known to us by our Superiors. However difficult their commands may be, we have only to say to ourselves: 'It is the Will of God. It seems difficult to me, but when did a difficulty prevent my Divine Master from accomplishing his Father's Will? Was it not that I might now have the grace to surmount the difficulty I find in obeying, that he suffered so much? Fear not, my soul; have courage and confidence. Never canst thou do enough for so good a Master!' Let us then in all our daily duties, how trivial soever they may appear, act from a motive of simple obedience, saying interiorly: 'It is through

obedience I take up this employment; it is through obedience that I eat, sleep, etc.' So shall we, as the Apostle says, 'do all for the glory of God.'"

It is true that the obedience required by the Rules and Constitutions of the Sisters of Notre Dame is most perfect. "Let them employ all their strength, and devote all their attention, to the very perfect practice of holy obedience, whether in the execution, whether in the will or judgement, by acquitting themselves with perseverance and spiritual gladness of all that shall be commanded" (Article 18).

Again: "They shall hearken to the voice of their Superior and to the sound of the bell, as if it were the voice of Jesus Christ himself. All shall instantly go whither they are called, even leaving unfinished a half-formed letter" (Article 62).

But if an obedience so entire is asked of the Sisters, they are not left without the means proper to enable them to fulfil it with peace and security, for the government of the Institute was from the beginning, by the help of the Holy Spirit, thoroughly well organised. The blessed Foundress suffered much in order to preserve the original plan—a Superioress General residing at the Mother House and with her Council administering the affairs of the Congregation and appointing the local Superiors. The Good Spirit has never failed to guide the Mothers placed at the head of the Institute. Not only have they each been distinguished by personal holiness, they have each been specially gifted for the development of the works of the Congregation in accordance with its primitive spirit and the needs of the time.

Blessed Julie, as is attested in the Office approved

by the Church for her feast, was "ever illumined by the light of Faith," and had "an unconquered love of the Cross." Hence the courage with which she overcame the initial difficulties met with in establishing the Congregation, and the constancy with which she endured the sufferings of mind and body which were the price she had to pay for its foundation.

Her co-Foundress and successor in the Generalate, Mère St Joseph, was in every sense of the word a great soul. She was great in natural gifts of mind and heart, great in her supernatural outlook on this world, great in her constant desire to carry out in every detail the Will of God. With heroic fortitude she had passed through the terrible time of the French Revolution, and had read her own name with those of her father and brother on the list of "aristocrats" condemned to the guillotine. When the sudden fall of Robespierre set her free, her first thought had been to dedicate the remainder of her life to God in the solitude of Carmel. As we have already seen, she had sacrificed her desire for that peaceful abode to the Will of God made known to her by her spiritual guides. She had realised the crying need of her time for those Apostolic women of whom Blessed Julie Billiart was the type; and she had devoted her person and her possessions to the foundation of the Institute of Notre Dame. Placed at the helm during the critical period of Catholic Belgium's forced subjection to the Protestant King of Holland, she steered the barque of Notre Dame safely through the troubled waters. She had all the qualities required to complete the work begun with Blessed Julie. She codified the Rules which had been tentatively observed by the first members of the Congrega-

tion, and she compiled the Directory which, as she observes, is intended "to guide the mind and heart without in any way putting constraint on the action of Divine grace." She taught by precept and example with what self-forgetfulness and devotedness to the service of their Sisters the local Superiors should exercise their office. She set the stamp of her gracious personality on the manner of conducting the reunions of the community, whether for instruction or recreation, and at all times and in all places, to quote the words of her biographer, "her relations with her subjects were based on a personal consideration and a mutual understanding which left no room for either harshness or servile fear, while at the same time she secured respect for the principle of authority which she represented with befitting dignity."

Of the remaining Mothers General, we shall only signalise Mère Ignace Thérèse Joséphine Goethals. She, too, was richly dowered by nature and grace. When her education was completed, she felt herself drawn to enter the Carmelite Convent at Courtrai, governed at the time by a relative of her own. But the Prioress, guided by the Holy Spirit and faithful to the light, disinterestedly turned the thoughts of her young cousin elsewhere. "Our Lord has destined you for the Apostolic life," she said; "you possess the soul of a Teresa united to that of a Xavier. Go where God is calling you." The young girl sought the advice of her uncle, the Vicar General of the diocese, who sent her as a postulant to the Sisters of Notre Dame. How well she realised the ideal there set before her, by uniting a high degree of contemplation to the incessant toil which her successive posts of Class Mistress, Mis-

tress General, Local Superior, and finally Mother General, imposed upon her will be shown in succeeding chapters, where we shall have occasion to quote her words of wisdom, or recount her deeds of valour. Enough has been said here to show that the high standard of obedience set before the Sisters of Notre Dame has been upheld by leaders worthy of the trust.

Let us now look for the secret of the maternal government and filial obedience which by God's grace still prevail throughout the Institute. We shall find it in the third characteristic of its spirit—Charity—and we shall learn its power and its practice from our Blessed Foundress herself, of whom the first Sisters used to say that, when she sang hymns, "it was love singing love." When they sat fireless in the cold winter evenings, she would say: "Come, my children, let us sing the praises of the Lord," and the fire of her soul communicating itself to theirs, they felt the cold no longer. At Courtrai, where she was well known, the people called her "The walking love of God." In one of her letters she writes:

"I can find nothing to say to you, my dear daughters, but what the beloved Disciple said: 'Love one another for the love of God; and God! oh, love him above all things.' It is a great comfort to me to know that you are all in the peace of the Lord. Ah, it could not be too dearly bought, that peace which we procure at the cost of a few little sacrifices. Yes, you will all taste of it if you are faithful to your meditation, as I believe each one of you is; if you ask earnestly of our Lord the spirit of simplicity, of meekness, of mutual forbearance. The good God is expecting me at my meditation, so you will not be vexed if I leave you to



go to him, my blessed Master. Oh, what a happy thing it is to love and serve him! How greatly he deserves our love! My God, why are our hearts not simply on fire with love for so good a Father? He knows how dearly I love you all in him."

It was from God himself that Blessed Julie would have the Sisters of Notre Dame obtain the gift of that love which should bind them to each other in him. Her living faith in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and her true devotion to the Sacred Heart, had won for her the inestimable privilege of daily Communion long before she was a nun, and at a time when Jansenistic prejudices made such a practice almost unknown. She greatly desired that her daughters should value at its true price the Sacrament of Love, and she took great pains to show them how best to prepare for its reception. Two dispositions, she assured them, were chiefly necessary: purity of heart, and a strong desire.

"The thought of Holy Communion," she said, "ought to be the soul of our life. When we are about to receive our Lord into our hearts, we should first banish from them all that is not God, and God alone. Any mere earthly affection will prevent the precious effects of Holy Communion. Our Lord can only do for us what we allow him to do. Secondly, we should excite in ourselves a great desire to increase in the love of God by the Communion we are about to make. As our Lady says in her *Magnificat*, 'He has filled the hungry with good things.' He was desired for centuries before he came into this world; and now he has a great repugnance to enter a heart which has little or no desire to receive him, and which thus does not



satisfy his burning love and the intense desire he has to give himself to us."

"As to our thanksgiving," she continued, "it should be made most carefully. There is no prayer more agreeable to God, or more helpful to souls than that made after Holy Communion. We profit most by his presence when we hear him saying in the depths of our hearts: 'A little while I am with you,' or, 'Me you have not always.' Then we lose not a moment of that precious time, but tell him all our love and our little miseries and lay all our hearts before him."

Blessed Julie often repeated that the most solid of all devotions is that to the Blessed Sacrament. "As we have the happiness," she would say, "of making our daily meditations at the foot of the altar, we should bring before our eyes the mysteries of our Lord's life as if we actually took part in them. He continues his life of immolation on our altars: and even if we remain there without one good thought, our souls are under His special influence, although we do not feel it. Our Lord acts, then, in quite a different way from that in which he acts in an oratory where the Blessed Sacrament is not reserved. How little we know our happiness! The first Christians always wished to have the Blessed Sacrament with them. That was the secret of their strength. Many saints have passed the greater part of their lives before the Tabernacle. We cannot remain there in body as long as we should wish; our apostolic vocation calls us elsewhere; but to the eye of faith there are no walls, and from the moment we are under the same roof with the Blessed Sacrament and are out of chapel by obedience, we still live in the

Eucharistic Presence in a spirit of adoration and self-immolation.”

“It is not necessary,” she concluded, “to have any feelings of devotion, any sweetness or consolation; but it is necessary to have that faith which enlarges the heart, and enables our Lord to give us more and more of his love, a deeper humility, a greater spirit of self-sacrifice. In God’s name, then, let the Holy Eucharist be the end of all our actions. This life of perpetual adoration, of continuous preparation or thanksgiving after Holy Communion, will make us so little in our own eyes that we can be passed over without resentment, and at the same time so great, so magnanimous, that by God’s grace we shall surmount every difficulty we meet with in working for his glory and the salvation of souls.”

## CHAPTER III

### PREPARATION AND PROBATION FOR THE APOSTOLIC LIFE OF THE SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME

**I**N order to realise the ideal of the Sisters of Notre Dame, it is not enough to admire it and wish to reach it. There must be a true vocation to the Apostolic life, with the personal qualities needed to carry it out happily and fruitfully. The end of the Institute is the good education of girls; but it is a mistake to suppose that every member should be employed in actual lesson-giving, or that the chief requisites for admission are college certificates, University degrees, or special aptitude for teaching. Such qualifications, indeed, when owned by a person of humble mind and docile heart, are valuable assets; but many Sisters of Notre Dame have lived holily and rendered great service without any of these distinctions.

When laying the foundations of her Institute under the direction of the saintly Père Varin, S.J., Blessed Julie was advised by him to gather round her "persons of sound judgement and good will." These are essential qualities, as necessary in domestic duties as in the class-room. Hence in the Constitutions of Notre Dame we read that postulants must possess, "above all, a well-balanced mind and a sound judgement" (Article 165). It is these qualities that will enable them to control the imagination when it suggests useless retrospections or anxious fears with regard to the future; to attend wholly to the business of the

moment; and to meet the daily difficulties and disappointments of life with the smile of Blessed Julie, seeing in them, as she did, welcome opportunities of proving the reality of the soul's trust in the good Providence of God.

When, therefore, admission into the Congregation has been obtained, there is a period of preparation and probation to be passed through, during which vocation to, and fitness for, the life are tested, while the spirit of the Institute is imbibed, good habits formed, and provision made for future labours. The first novices were under the immediate supervision of Blessed Julie, who, in a memorable conference given at Namur, thus addressed them: "What is a novice? She is a person aspiring after perfection, taking the first steps along the path of virtue with the hope of reaching the goal of her desires. What is a novice? She is a soul not yet perfect, but striving with all her might to become so, by setting self aside in order to occupy her mind solely with the great affair for which she has quitted the world. In a word, she is a soul called upon to forget all that she has left behind, for the sake of the One Beloved. What is a novice? She is a soul with no preoccupation but the thought of what may best fit her for the great alliance she is about to contract with Jesus Christ as his bride. She can only render herself less unworthy of him by labouring hard to conquer self in all things. Therefore she endeavours to rise above nature as far as human weakness will permit; for, my good Sisters, who is without faults? Do not I myself commit them every day of my life? . . . Finally, either you are called to our manner of life, or you are not. If you are called, enter upon it with great courage and you

will attain perfection. By what means? By sincere distrust of your own powers and entire confidence in God. Do not fear the obstacles you will encounter in the path of virtue. With good will and patience you will triumph over them all."

Mère Saint Joseph, in her turn, as we are told by one who was a novice at Namur during her Generalate, "devoted zealous care to the novitiate, and would frequently give religious instruction to her 'little white veils,' as she tenderly named them. She did not conceal from them that their vocation was a call to sacrifice, and that the bride of Christ must exercise herself constantly on mortification of heart and mind."

"The training given in the novitiate," writes the biographer of Mère St Joseph, "was excellent, and the spirit of fervour reigned among its members. A Jesuit Father who visited it from time to time compared its spirit to that of the Jesuit novitiate in Rome which had been adorned by a Saint Aloysius and a Saint Stanislaus." High ideals and solid virtue characterised these young souls. After the example of Blessed Julie, Mère St Joseph would have nothing narrow or petty about their formation. She wanted great and magnanimous souls who at the same time were profoundly humble and quite simple. That such were not lacking may be gathered from the annals of the Institute and from the testimony of Sister Vincent, an enlightened Novice Mistress of those early times. "There was a holy thirst," she says, "for humiliation and sacrifice. I had not to urge on the novices. I had, on the contrary, to moderate the ardour of their impulses towards sanctity, stimulated as they were to acquire the highest virtue by the example of Mère St Joseph. In this

chosen soul God alone had entirely supplanted creatures. He had made himself complete Master. To observe her conduct was to receive a deep impression of consummate sanctity, and to be urged to make vigorous resolutions never to hesitate in choosing the more perfect way of acting."

Mère St Joseph fully realised the supreme importance of this period of training. Again and again in her correspondence we find her reiterating the same principle: "I would rather sacrifice a class than imperil the vocation and instruction of a novice. This was the view of our dear Mère Julie." Occasionally the co-Foundress was forced by circumstances to act contrary to this maxim, but she never allowed a measure of exigency to become an established custom. When the Dutch yoke was cast off by Belgium, there was a large increase of postulants at Namur. New foundations were urgently asked for; but Mère St Joseph would not hear of novices going to Secondary Houses before their period of training was complete. "No," she would say, "let my little white flock be formed in peace. It is the ruin of any Institute to employ the novices before they are thoroughly trained. I was forced to do so in the pressing need we were in under King William, but I now beg the superiors not to put me to the pain of refusing their request, for I will not give up a single one of my little white veils."

Owing to the difference of language and the difficulty of travelling in those days, Blessed Julie had established two novitiates: Namur for Wallonia, Ghent for Flanders. In 1837 that of Ghent was suppressed, and Namur became the sole centre for the training of novices. In 1840, a novitiate for the American Province



was established at Cincinnati, Ohio; but novices from England were trained at Namur until the Great European War (1914-1919) interfered with this arrangement. The requirements of Canon Law also necessitated the establishment of a novitiate for the English Province.

The Reverend Mother General, Maria Julienne, entrusted this work to the late Sister Marie des SS Anges, Mary Elizabeth Townley, who had been for many years Mistress of Postulants at Namur, and Assistant for England to the Reverend Mother General. She was a chosen soul, not unworthy to take her place beside the revered and beloved Sister Mary of St Francis (the Honourable Laura Maria Petre) to whom England owes so much, both for her perfect understanding and practice of the spirit of Notre Dame and her munificent generosity in aid of the good works carried on by the Institute. After the death of Sister Mary of St Francis in 1886, Sister Marie des Saints Anges continued loyally to walk in the footsteps of the Superior and friend she so deeply revered and loved, devoting, with the permission of her Superiors, her best energies and a large part of her fortune to the good works of Notre Dame in England, Scotland and Africa. When, therefore, she was called upon to establish the English novitiate, she took it in hand with the simple, loving spirit of obedience that had always characterised her, and at once commissioned her agents to look for a suitable site. It was found in Ashdown Park, Sussex, where a handsome stone house amid delightful surroundings seemed to have been built for the purpose to which, by God's good Providence, it was to be devoted. A quarry on the estate supplied the material for the needed extensions, and for the erection of the beautiful church,

whose consecration in 1927 set the seal upon this great work.

We do not propose to attempt here to pay a fitting tribute to the life-work of Sister Marie des Saints Anges. It is inscribed in the memories of all who have known and loved her, and whose grateful hearts are her living monument. It is written too in the memorial chantry of the Ashdown Church, where her mortal remains await the day of General Resurrection, and where, until that day shall come, succeeding generations of the novices of Notre Dame shall kneel to pay their debt of loving and grateful commemoration. What we have now to consider is the present training of these novices. Is it in keeping with both the primitive spirit of the Institute and the needs of the twentieth century? We can answer the question with truth and thankfulness in the affirmative. The young girl who enters the novitiate at Ashdown Park will pass there one of the happiest periods of her life. She may come crowned with distinction from some college or university, or her education may have been by circumstances confined within the limits of an elementary school. She may have been from her childhood under the influence of the Sisters of Notre Dame, or she may never have even heard of them, until her spiritual director or some confidential friend introduced her to the congregation. In any case, provided that she has a true vocation and the requisite qualities and aptitudes, she is received with simple cordiality, and at once given her place as a child of the house. She finds enlightened guidance and congenial companionship, and she begins with courage and confidence her time of probation.

The greater part of this time is devoted to prayer and

spiritual exercises. Instructions in Christian Doctrine are given by the Reverend Chaplain appointed by the Bishop of Southwark, in whose diocese the novitiate is situated, and on the Religious Life by the Sisters chosen by the Reverend Mother General to act as mistresses of novices and postulants. It has been remarked that so profound is the silence, so continuous the practice of recollection, at Ashdown Park, that one would think it was the novitiate of a contemplative Order. This is only another proof of its fidelity to the example set by the Mother House at Namur, and to the traditions of the Institute, by which the Apostolate of its members is held to derive its efficacy from their spirit of prayer. Our first Sisters well realised that only by keeping their own souls in the presence of God could they hope to bring to him the souls entrusted to their care. "The Saints," said Blessed Julie, "knew secrets, which we do not know, about walking in God's presence, which made it easy for them to do so. They were never preoccupied with passing events which were not connected with God's greater glory. A good Sister of Notre Dame, although she may have many distracting occupations, can still hear our Lord saying to her these words of the Cantic of Canticles: 'Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come; my dove in the clefts of the rock, show me thy face.' She hides herself in spirit in the Wounds of our Lord Jesus Christ where all our Sisters should establish their home. There they will always find a secure refuge in trial, and strength in weakness. There they will imbibe the Apostolic Spirit at its source, and, united to the Heart of Jesus, they will do great good to souls and give great glory to God. A soul thus united to God performs every one

of her actions perfectly, in order to please her heavenly Bridegroom. In a short time she acquires that maturity which the Spirit of God bestows when he reigns supreme in a soul. Do all in your power to walk in God's presence, you who are called to the Apostolic life, and you will be able to share with the children who ask you for bread the substantial nourishment which your own soul derives from its union with the Source of life."

The visitor to Ashdown Park who may get a passing glimpse of the novices and postulants during their hours of recreation is struck by their evident light-heartedness and gaiety. That is one of the marks of a true vocation to Notre Dame; for, as Blessed Julie remarked: "The thought of God does not make us sad or sombre; on the contrary, it causes joy to spring up in the soul, according to the prophet David: 'My soul refused to be comforted; I remembered God and was delighted' (Ps. lxxv). The remembrance of God's presence within her," she added, "works wonders in the soul that remains willingly with her Divine Master."

It is evident, therefore, that the time devoted to the cultivation of the interior spirit is well spent, and is of the greatest value as regards the future work of the novice. If she is to be employed chiefly in manual labour, she will know how to let God living within her make use of her bodily strength and her industry for his greater glory. If she is to be employed in teaching, she will have learned to keep so vigilant a guard over the purity of her intention and the fidelity of her conduct that Christ himself will not fail to be the Master of her pupils. As the period of probation draws to a close, every novice finds herself, on the one hand,

wishful to remain in the peace and happiness of the novitiate; on the other, filled with longing to bind herself by the triple cord which shall make her a Sister of Notre Dame.

“For them do I sanctify myself,” said our Lord, referring primarily to his Apostles, those twelve chosen pupils of his to whom he gave his most sublime lessons; but also, in the second place, to those other followers of his throughout the ages who, through them and their successors, the Bishops and Priests of his Church, should believe in him.

The novice of Notre Dame, as she ponders in her heart those words of her Divine Master, may reverently and thankfully make them her own. She, too, is sanctifying herself, or rather God is sanctifying her, for “them,” preferably, as her Rule tells her, for “the poor of the most abandoned spots,” whom she is “to train to good morals, Christian virtues, and the duties of their state.” The scene of her future labours may lie in darkest Africa, or in the scarcely less dark slum districts of a busy city, or she may be sent to teach in a high school or college. Her post has been already assigned to her by the good providence of God. It will be made known to her in due time by her Superiors, who will carefully consider her special qualities and aptitudes, so as to place her where she can make the best use of them and develop them for God’s greater glory, the good of others, and her own eternal happiness. During the second year of the noviceship, therefore, more time is allotted to the study of languages and science, and to the preparation of lessons in various branches. This is quite in keeping with the primitive spirit and the traditions of the Mother House. While



making "the gratuitous instruction of poor children" a *sine qua non* in all the Convents of Notre Dame, Blessed Julie and Mère St Joseph wisely left room in the Constitutions of the Congregation for future developments. So it has come about that, as in England and Scotland, for example, children may pass from the elementary schools under the Sisters of Notre Dame to free places in their secondary schools and thence to a training college or university.

For the sake of the souls committed to their care, the Sisters themselves do not hesitate to enter the lists as candidates for university honours. They are careful to keep pace with the times in matters educational, and they look upon their studies as Blessed Julie taught the first Sisters to do, "not only as a useful and necessary means to teach successfully, and a duty of obedience, but also as an obligation of strict justice towards the pupils and their parents." At the same time they have to keep in mind the great principle which our first Mothers never grew tired of inculcating, that it is only by union with our Lord that they will be able to make good use of their knowledge, and succeed in the sublime enterprise which has for its goal the formation of his likeness in the souls of their pupils.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE VOWS—MISSIONS AND EXPERIENCES

IT is recorded in the annals of the Institute that the feast preferred above all others by Mère St Joseph was that of the Blessed Trinity. When the first Sisters used to ask her to talk to them about it, she would reply: "What can I say but Holy, Holy, Holy? Everything within us should be constantly repeating this hymn of adoration." She would then impress upon her hearers that the Sign of the Cross is a most eloquent prayer, a profession of our faith, a summary of our religion; hence that it cannot be made too reverently. She also insisted on the sentiments of profound worship, of adoring love, with which we should repeat the *Gloria Patri*; finally, she would urge upon the Sisters the practice of frequent renewal of Baptismal vows. "It is the vows made by sponsors in our name at Baptism," she would say, "that make us children of God, that unite us to the most Holy Trinity; our vows of Religion serve to safeguard them and enable us to keep them better." It is from the teaching and example of their first Mothers that the Sisters of Notre Dame have derived the custom of keeping with solemnity the anniversary of their Baptism and on that day specially renewing their Baptismal vows. They realise that in proportion to their fidelity to these vows will be their share in the Communion of Saints and their right to exclaim with joy, as did St Teresa when about to die: "Thank God! after all I am a child of Holy Church."

The novice about to make her first vows is standing on the threshold of the Religious State. She is about to correspond with the call of God who has asked her to give him a special love and devotedness not asked of all mankind. Once she has crossed this threshold by making her vows, she is in the Religious State—that is, she is bound to strive after perfection. She does not bind herself to perform always that which is most perfect. Saints have done this, and it is known that the third Mother General of the Institute, Mère Ignace, was allowed by her confessor to make such a vow. Other Sisters, without actually making the vow, have taken such strong resolutions in accordance with its spirit that through life they have been observed always to choose the most perfect way of acting. Such heroic conduct is not expected of all: all have not the special grace for its observance. All who make the ordinary vows of religion, however, contract a serious obligation to be faithful to them. They will be so, in proportion to the fidelity with which they follow the path of perfection marked out by their Rules and Constitutions.

Theologians teach that a vow is the highest possible human act. The act of the Priest in the Mass is not human but divine, for Christ himself is the Offerer of the Sacrifice. But the vow is a contract made between God and man: God accepts what the individual professes. By the vow of Poverty the Sister of Notre Dame consecrates to God all the goods of this world, whether actually possessed or liable to be acquired; by the vow of Chastity, every sense of the body, every affection of the heart; by the vow of Obedience, the noblest faculties of the soul. Moreover, she makes a formal promise to have, “according to obedience, a

particular care of the instruction of young girls in the Company of the glorious Virgin Mary, our Lady.”

She makes her first vows for one year, renewing them annually at the end of her first and second years of profession. At the end of her third year she renews them for an uninterrupted period of three years, when, if considered worthy, she will be admitted to perpetual vows.

After the vows come the Missions, as they are commonly termed, when the newly professed Sister leaves the novitiate to take her place in one of the Communities of the Congregation. There was greater scope for heroism perhaps in olden days, when the first foundations were fearlessly undertaken and carried on courageously in the face of opposition and privation now almost unknown. We read in the annals how Blessed Julie, after founding a house and instructing the Sisters in their duties, usually had to leave them without any resource but confidence in the good God. In the time of Mère St Joseph the Sisters endured not merely actual poverty and hard toil, but harassing persecution and annoying interference in their good works on the part of Government officials. Yet their courage and constancy never failed. During the days of their noviceship they had laid such solid foundations of simplicity, obedience and charity, that their zealous labours for souls were not even interrupted, still less ended, during the critical period of Dutch rule in Belgium.

At that time Mère Ignace, then a young and brilliant mistress in the boarding school at Jumet, distinguished herself by her personal devotedness to the cause of education. The labours and anxieties she underwent

seriously undermined her constitution. As her bodily strength decreased, however, the courage and constancy of her soul grew stronger than ever. She had always longed to realise in her own person that vision wherein Blessed Julie had beheld her daughters carrying the light of the Gospel to far-off lands. Elected Mother General in 1838, she could no longer cherish that desire of her Apostolic soul; but it was she who, two years later, sent Sisters of Notre Dame from Namur to America, in response to the appeal of his lordship the Bishop of Cincinnati.

Eight valiant Sisters set out on that mission in 1840, long before steam and electricity had brought the Old and New Worlds into such close touch with each other as they are today. The Sisters sailed from Antwerp on September 9, reaching New York on October 19, and Cincinnati on the eve of the feast of All Saints. Their accounts of the voyage and of their first experiences in what was to them the land of their desires (for they had cherished hopes of evangelising the native Indians) make most interesting and edifying reading. We are debarred by limitations of space from giving even a few extracts from their diary, but we cannot refrain from quoting the parting words of Mère Ignace to the daughters whom she was never to see on earth again.

“What peace, what sweetness, what happiness should fill your hearts, my dear Sisters, from the assurance you have that in obeying your superiors you are doing the Will of God! Be always simple in thought, in word, in act, for, as you know, simplicity is one of the distinctive marks of a true Sister of Notre Dame. Observe the rules of religious modesty according to

our spirit. Love poverty and desire to feel its effects, so that you may resemble him who had not where to lay his head. Have a strong and tender devotion to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Never suffer in yourselves the least voluntary imperfection, the least infidelity to grace. Try to be in the hands of God docile instruments which he can make use of as he pleases for his glory. Act only by the impulse and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Fear neither pain nor labour, but sacrifice yourself generously, with your gaze fixed on Jesus, who from his cross asks you to follow him. Fight for your King in this world that you may be with him for ever in the world to come. Have but one heart and one soul; and remember that unless you are always profoundly humble you can do absolutely nothing in the order of grace. Finally, cherish a most tender affection for Mary. Love her, and to the last moment of your life seek to make her known and loved by others. Then she will come to meet you in the hour of death, and conduct you to the heavenly Jerusalem, where I hope to sing with you eternally the praises of Jesus and Mary."

Mère Ignace died in 1842. Her sorrowing daughters rose up and called her blessed, and we trust that their prayers and ours will one day secure that her name, as well as those of our first two Mothers, shall be inscribed by the Church in her catalogue of the Saints. She was succeeded by another Mother of eminent holiness and great natural gifts, Mère Marie Thérèse, whose failing health, however, forced her to resign the Generalate in less than two years. Mère Constantine, who was elected to replace her, continued to hand down with unimpeachable fidelity the traditions of the



Institute. She provided for the careful training of the novices, she watched over the development of the young professed Sisters, and she stimulated the ardour of those elect souls, called by God to the most heroic self-sacrifice. It was she who sent the first band of Sisters to help in the Indian Missions under the care of the renowned Jesuit, Father de Smet, "The Apostle of the Rocky Mountains."

The Sisters chosen for this coveted mission sailed from Antwerp on December 12, 1844. A few days previously they had set out from Namur accompanied by the Mother General. They made a short stay at the Convent in Brussels, where the Papal Nuncio came to visit them, bringing for each a little picture signed with his name—Joachim Pecci—afterwards the illustrious Pope Leo XIII. We must pass over in silence the details of that seven months' voyage in *The Indefatigable* through the Atlantic, round Cape Horn, to the mouth of the Columbia River on the North Pacific coast. In their simple diaries and letters we see the Sisters passing through the perils met with in its course, with the courage and confidence bequeathed to their Congregation by the Blessed Julie and her co-Foundress, Mère St Joseph. There were dangers from pirates, from floating icebergs, from hurricanes which tore even the furled sails into ribbons and all but wrecked the vessel on the Patagonian coast. Finally, there was the facing of almost certain destruction, when the pilot of the vessel mistook the channel in crossing the bar at the mouth of the river. It was on this voyage that the Jesuit Fathers and the Sisters of Notre Dame together made a vow to the Immaculate Heart of Mary to perform certain devotions and mortifications in her honour

for three years after their safe landing. They eventually sailed without difficulty into the harbour, Father de Smet exclaiming, "We have been saved by a miracle."

The story of this glorious undertaking, its trials and disappointments, the transfer of the colony planted at St Paul's, Willamette, first to Oregon city, then to St José, is graphically told in the Diamond Jubilee edition of the work of the Sisters of Notre Dame on the Pacific coast, *In Harvest Fields by Sunset Shores*, issued from the College of Notre Dame, Belmont, California, in 1926. In that interesting volume may also be read the account of the foundation made in Guatemala by eight Sisters from Namur, who embarked from Southampton on October 17, 1859, and the tragic expulsion of the Community from the South American Republic, some fifteen years later. Here we only wish to point out once again the spirit of simplicity, obedience and charity which characterised the pioneers of the Congregation of Notre Dame de Namur in America. We in England have only to give hospitality for a few days to our American Sisters travelling to or from Namur to recognise in them the true daughters of Blessed Julie Billiart, and the worthy successors of those valiant women who brought to their land the spirit of Notre Dame de Namur.

For the Sisters of Notre Dame in England today it may be difficult to picture out the experiences of the pioneers who, in 1845, brought the banner of Notre Dame from Namur, one of our Lady's cities of predilection, to Penryn in Cornwall, one of the strongholds of Protestantism, where her name was hardly known. It will be good for us, however, with reverent gratitude to lift the veil which covers all they did and suffered

in those old days, that we may note how their inner life was that of our first Sisters at Namur, and that which we are doing our best to make ours today.

Let us begin by a glance at the heroic sons of St Alphonsus, at that time in charge of the Catholic Chapel in Falmouth, for it was their Reverend Superior, the saintly Father de Buggenoms, who was our Lady's agent in the introduction of her Sisters into this country. An extract from a letter written by him to his Provincial will bear witness to his piety and zeal:

"The object of my journey to Paris, besides my business with propaganda, was to make a pilgrimage to Notre Dame des Victoires so as to find out through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin, who always hears my prayers, whether it was really the Will of God that I should establish a Community of the Sisters of Notre Dame in Cornwall. . . . As soon as I reached Paris, I asked leave from the venerable curé, M. Desgenettes, to say Mass every day at the shrine of our Lady of Victories, and he gladly granted my request. I then besought the Blessed Virgin to let me hear interiorly, but in a way that I could not mistake, what was God's Will in this matter. Day after day the same answer was given to me: 'This foundation must be made, although it will not succeed.' "

Putting all his trust in Mary, and feeling convinced that, though her Sisters were not to stay in that remote corner of England to which he was about to bring them, they would eventually help to win back her dowry, Father de Buggenoms visited Namur to confer with Mère Constantine on the proposed foundation; and on Saturday, November 8, 1845, the first band of Sisters left the Mother House for England. It is

not our intention to enter here into the details of their hard struggle, for three years, against poverty and persecution. We are concerned chiefly with their faithful preservation of the primitive spirit of the Institute.

When the Redemptorist Fathers decided to leave Falmouth, it was considered expedient for the Sisters to leave Penryn for Clapham, where there seemed to be a better prospect of their succeeding in the Apostolic work they had come to do in England; but the little Community had not failed while in Cornwall to make good their title as Sisters of Notre Dame.

Sister Clarie, the Superioress, had been professed at Namur in 1835. Her natural gifts were remarkable; but still more deserving of note were her simple faith and profound humility. As Mistress General of the boarding school at Jumet she had won the confidence of both pupils and parents. As Sister Superior at Liège (St Catherine's), and afterwards at Visé, she had merited the grateful affection of her communities and the esteem of all who came in contact with her. Her spiritual directors had approved of her making the vow to do always that which seemed most perfect; and she ardently longed to devote her life to the foreign missions. For thirty years she led her Sisters at Penryn, at Clapham, at Northampton, and then again at Clapham, along the path of perfection marked out by Blessed Julie. In 1875 ill-health caused her to be recalled to the Mother House, where she passed the last ten years of her life in great suffering, but with exemplary patience and fidelity to the spirit of her Rule.

Of the other pioneers of Penryn, mention should be made of Sister Marie Alix, the music mistress, a model

of simplicity and obedience, to whose miraculous cure the Protestant doctor gave his attestation. We quote from the *Life of Sister Mary of St Francis, S.N.D.*, edited by Dom Bede Camm, O.S.B., p. 147:

“Let us listen to an extract from her deposition in the preliminary process for Blessed Mère Julie’s Beati-  
fication: ‘Towards the end of November, 1846, I had a severe illness. Indeed, so ill was I that I received Extreme Unction, and the blessed candle was placed in my hands, while the community knelt around me to say the Prayers for the Dying. In the first days of this illness, Sister Superior told me I ought to pray to be cured by Christmas Eve as the choir would need my services at Midnight Mass. I did ask most earnestly this favour from our Lady, through the intercession of our two venerated Foundresses and of dear Mère Ignace. Suddenly I saw our Lady with the Divine Infant whom she placed in my arms, to my unspeakable joy and sweet consolation. She told me that the doctor, a Protestant, would die a Catholic, and that I was to give him and to each of his family a miraculous medal. Father de Buggenoms has told me since that the doctor really did become a Catholic.

““In this first apparition our Lady had with her our three Mothers: Mère Julie, Mère St Joseph, and Mère Ignace. They were kneeling and in prayer. Mère Julie turned to me with a smile: “Daughter,” she said, “you are not going to die now. You will have much to suffer yet, and many humiliations through your life.”

““A few days later I again saw the Blessed Virgin. She again gave me her Divine Son to hold, and left him in my arms for above an hour. This time our



three Mothers were each accompanied by a throng of people of diverse nations. Each of our Mothers seemed to follow a Cross, and all three were surrounded by light. Mère Julie's Cross was the largest, and her lustre by far the most brilliant. She foretold to me that we should leave Penryn, but remain in England, and that an English lady, very pleasing in God's sight, would enter our Institute and procure therein great glory to God. Later on I happened to open the door when the Hon. Mrs. Petre called at our first convent in Clapham. I was deeply moved when she gave me her name, for it flashed across me that this was the lady, "pleasing in God's sight," whose name up to that instant I had never been able to remember.'"

In a third vision, on Christmas Eve, Sister Marie Alix was shown the circumstances of her own instantaneous cure.

Details of the first two trances, from an onlooker's point of view, occur in Sister Clarie's letters to Namur. Thus on November 27 she writes:

"Sister Marie Alix has received the Last Sacraments. She is always speaking of Jesus and Mary: 'Jesus, I offer my pain for the conversion of Protestants; Mary, pray for Protestants.' She had today a sort of ecstasy for two hours. There she lay, her face radiant with joy, her hands lifted towards Jesus and Mary whom she saw; she said, in ravishing loveliness: 'Oh, look, look! How beautiful is Mary! If the Protestants could but know!'

"When the doctor came in: 'You, you Protestant, pray to Mary! You must be converted, or else no heaven for you. Won't you pray to Mary?'

" 'Yes,' he answered.

“ ‘ But will you do it from your heart ?’

“ The doctor says she may recover. She is better since the Last Sacraments, but still in delirium. Such a happy delirium ! I am writing this at her bedside.”

Sister Clarie is careful not to commit herself as to the nature of these trances. “ But from whatever source they come they do good—for the sufferer is patient and humble, and her conversation impresses the Sisters with great esteem for obedience.” Father de Buggenoms, no partisan of extraordinary ways in spirituality, was away on a begging tour throughout the illness; but he came home in time to spend the night of Christmas Eve in the convent where he was to celebrate Midnight Mass. Sister Marie Alix told him after confession that if she received an order to play and sing during the Holy Sacrifice, obedience would give her the necessary strength. He thought she was raving; but after he had spent some time in silent prayer, he consulted with the Superior, and together they went to the infirmary and told the invalid to follow her inspiration.

She dressed unaided and came to the chapel, where she assisted at two Masses in succession. Her voice rang out sweet and clear in the midnight *Gloria*, while the other Sisters, overcome with emotion, could only pour out their hearts to God in silent thanksgiving.

The cure, of course, was noised abroad, but the prudent Superior took effective measures that at least the events preceding it should remain “ the secret of the King.” “ Sister Marie Alix,” she wrote, “ firmly believes that every dying person sees such things as she has seen. It seems to her that she can never refuse any sacrifice whatever to the good God. The most

consoling thing about it all is her humility. She must keep in her littleness, unaware of the good opinion people might conceive of her; so I have warned the Sisters not to speak of the cure, nor of anything edifying they may have noticed during her illness; and I know they won't."

"Lest it should harm the dear Sister," Sister Clarie stifled her own very legitimate curiosity, and refrained from questioning, as to the details of the visions. "She remembers very well all that she has seen and heard, and would tell us very readily all about it; but I believe it safer that she should not suspect I attach any importance to such revelations."

This attitude of aloofness was sanctioned and commended at Namur. It is highly probable, however, that Sister Marie Alix wrote full details in her New Year's letter to Mère Constantine. She remained to the end a model of simple union with God and fidelity to the grace of her vocation, the type of those Sisters in past and present times whose real lives are "hidden with Christ in God." They are best known, no doubt, to the angels of the native children in British South Africa, in the Belgian Congo, in Japan, and in many an almost pagan city of both the Old and the New World. They probably have no miraculous events to relate, and the only ecstasy they experience is that so vividly described by Blessed Julie in a conference given at Namur more than a hundred years ago: "All Sisters of Notre Dame," she said, "are called to a sort of ecstatic life. There are inspirations and heavenly vocations, for the carrying out of which God must draw us completely out of ourselves and our natural inclinations. We then are living, not an ordinary Christian life, but

a highly supernatural life, spiritual and ecstatic, so that we actually love poverty, humiliations, and sufferings, living in this world in a manner contrary to its maxims. No one can lead this life unless drawn by God out of all selfishness, all merely human desires, and actions. It follows that this life is a continual ecstasy, to which we may aspire without fear of delusion. As Sisters of Notre Dame we ought to desire to become this kind of ecstatics. This sort of ecstasy is a real transformation effected by the love of God; and when we enter into it we may say with St Paul: 'I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me.' "

"Let us all then," she continued, "strive to become true ecstatics. Let each Sister live so closely united to God, as if he and she were alone in this world. Let her often withdraw into the inner sanctuary of her soul, there to hold silent converse with him, and be by him transformed more and more into his likeness. This may be done at any moment, or any place, even in a crowded classroom, for the Sister who is filled with the spirit of faith sees in each of her pupils a soul made to the image of God and for whom our Lord gave his life. She has to help him to develop the likeness of his Father in that soul, and she knows that this can only be done by her constant union with him. While her mind is occupied with various lessons, her heart is constantly raised in supplication, begging our Lord to preserve and increase in the souls of her pupils the likeness of his Father through the merits of his own Passion and Death. In this way she converses continually with the good God."

"But this ecstatic life," she concluded, "must be born of self-annihilation—that is, the soul must be

as nothing before God in its profound humility. Every Sister of Notre Dame should aim at this. She can have no attachment but to God, no desire but the fulfilment of his Holy Will."

Such sentiments as these must have animated the brave little band of Sisters who set out from England to help in the Zambesi Mission in May, 1899. Twenty years before, that Mission had been entrusted to the Society of Jesus; and the Reverend Father Daignault, appointed Superior in December, 1886, began a settlement at Empandeni in Southern Rhodesia. The Fathers entered into possession of an estate of 6,000 acres; and as the Superior of the Mission was empowered to admit or expel settlers, good order was maintained in the colony. Circumstances arose, however, which caused it to be abandoned for a time, and it was not again taken in hand until 1895, only four years before the arrival of the Sisters. It is not surprising, therefore, that there were many disappointments to be faced, many almost insurmountable obstacles to be overcome.

When the Sisters reached their destination they found their little convent still unroofed, and not likely to be habitable for some weeks. Their only shelter was a sort of tent made by covering in with calico the verandah which stretched along one side of the iron chapel. It was not, however, their homelessness, or the want of the barest necessities for preserving health and cleanliness, that tried the endurance of those five pioneers to the utmost limits. It was the sight of the utter destitution and pitiable condition of the chapel and the huts of the Fathers, who were living a life of heroic poverty and toil, in the midst of a people of almost unimaginable



degradation. This was the life the Sisters had come to share, and at the first glimpse of it their hearts must have sunk within them. But as they neared Empandeni the first sound that fell upon their ears was that of the Angelus bell. It seemed as if our Lady was reminding them that they, too, were "handmaids," and that they had vowed to devote their lives "to the poor of the most abandoned spots."

At that call, they set themselves to the task before them with the courage and confidence bequeathed to them by the first Mothers and Sisters of Notre Dame. They toiled as they had never toiled before, adapting themselves to the circumstances of the place, mastering the native language, and winning their way into the minds and hearts of the children for whose souls they had come to live and die. They were more than patient and resigned. They were happy. One of them wrote home: "I can only wonder at the real happiness which hardships, moral and physical, can bring. I was never so happy in my life, yet I have never had so difficult a prospect before me."

Barely twenty-five years had passed when it was noted in the *Zambesi Mission Record* that the Very Rev. Father Provincial of the Jesuits had inspected "the Industrial School and the school for native children at the convent and found them wonderfully well equipped." Other inspectors, both religious and secular, have borne testimony to the marvellous blessings which have been showered upon the work of Notre Dame in the various African Missions undertaken by the Sisters. All honour to those who there literally bear the burden and heat of the day, and who are "not afraid of the terror of the night." Such outposts of

distinction are for the privileged few. Yet the many whose daily round is passed under conditions more civilised, perhaps, in one sense, but in another sense really more pagan, need never fear that they will be without their share of suffering and self-sacrifice.

Blessed Julie made it clear that the Apostolic life of the Sisters of Notre Dame should only be embraced by strong souls. In a conference given at Namur in 1812 she impressed upon her hearers that "the motive for entering our society should be far different from that of finding a safe retreat from the dangers of the world. The chief aim should be the glory of God and the salvation of souls, with the desire to immolate self completely in order to secure this end."

"Those who come to us," she said, "thinking to find their ease, deceive themselves, and sooner or later God winnows them away. In our Congregation we need souls full of faith who, knowing what sacrifice means, do not fritter away their lives, continually turning round self as a centre. Such effeminate characters are not fit for our Institute. We need a manly spirit which finds nothing too hard when the glory of God is concerned." It was the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, and Blessed Julie went on speaking out of the fulness of her heart:

"God never leaves his elect, especially his spouses, without crosses. On the contrary, he sends more to those who are most faithful to him. Distrust the crosses we make for ourselves; they are heavy and without any merit. On the other hand, when God sends crosses he knows how to lighten them by the interior unction of his grace. Then it is that the faithful soul finds nothing hard to bear. On the con-

trary, it seems to her that she has no cross to carry because she is generous towards God, and God on his side sustains her with his grace. Yet the faithful soul is never for one moment without a cross either interior or exterior; for God sees that such a suffering, such a humiliation, such a pain of mind or body will work in her its salutary effects."

"True Sisters of Notre Dame," she said, on another occasion, "are victims ever living, ever dying: ever living by their love of God and zeal for his glory, ever dying by the immolation of self to God's Will. . . . For a Sister of Notre Dame, there must be no question of caprice, of fancy, of inclination. She must be dead to all such things and live only the life of Jesus crucified. Each day she should take one step forward to Calvary."

## CHAPTER V

### NOTABLE INSTANCES OF THE WORKING OUT OF THE SPECIAL DESIGNS OF GOD IN THE SOULS OF INDIVIDUAL SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME

**I**N one of his meditations on the Visitation of our Lady, Archbishop Goodier makes a suggestion which may be aptly quoted at the beginning of this chapter:

“When Elizabeth knew of the grace of motherhood that had been conferred on her, we are told that she hid herself five months. . . . When Mary knew of the same grace conferred on her she, ‘rising up, went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda,’ and there saluted Elizabeth. The spontaneous actions are significant. Elizabeth is the hermit, and cherishes the gifts of God in the contemplative life. Mary is the more active, and is prompted by the gifts of God to go and share all she has with others. . . . But the fruit of the contemplative is John the Baptist, who shall ‘convert many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.’ So, indeed, it is in all time. The making of an Apostle is not in the lecture-room and the public place; there he learns only the use of his weapons; but it is in secret, in that part of the soul which answers most to the life contemplative. Conversely, as is seen in our Lady, the first work of the Apostle is charity; its first, indeed its only work” (*The Prince of Peace*).

These thoughts carry us back to the first two chapters of this book, where the ideal aimed at by the Sisters

of Notre Dame in their inner life is pictured out. We have seen that every true vocation to Notre Dame must be marked by an earnest desire for simple union with God, accompanied by the will to work for his glory in a spirit of obedience and charity. We have shown how the ideal was realised by the blessed Foundress and her companion, and have given examples of its attainment by their first daughters in Belgium, America and England. It remains for us to show the way in which God in his wisdom has made use of our little Congregation in order to carry out his great designs upon special souls. We give a few significant instances of Sisters of Notre Dame, whose natural gifts would have brought them distinction in any state of life, but who, as Sisters of Notre Dame, secured a far higher and an everlasting distinction.

In the preface to the *Life of Sister Mary of Saint Francis, née Laura Stafford-Jerningham*, Dom Bede Camm, O.S.B., writes:

“It certainly would be sad if a life like that of Sister Mary of St Francis were to be forgotten, especially in her native land. It may be doubted if the work that this laborious and humble religious did for the conversion of England has been surpassed by more than a very few of her contemporaries. Her record of achievement is indeed a marvellous one; and it is made still more wonderful, when we recall the fact that it was effected by one who was self-exiled from her country for the love of her Divine Spouse.

“From her quiet retreat at Namur this noble woman worked night and day for the Catholic cause in England, especially for the souls of our little children, to whose salvation she devoted her great fortune, her greater



powers of heart and intellect, and her very life. The story told in these pages gives the wonderful details, and gives also some glimpses of the secret motive-power of all this generous and devoted activity, a burning love of Jesus and of the souls for whom he died."

In the biography to which this preface was written we get vivid pictures of the charming child of Lord and Lady Stafford in her ancestral home at Costessey, about four miles from Norwich, with the "wonderfully intelligent dark eyes sparkling with fun." We see her at the Convent of New Hall, Essex, preparing fervently to make her First Communion, and confiding to Mother Clifford that she wishes to be a nun. A few years later we meet her as the affianced bride of the Hon. Edward Petre, nephew to Bernard, twelfth Duke of Norfolk. Then follow the years of married life in which she gives unmistakable evidence of her goodness of heart and greatness of soul. With regard to this marriage, it has been suggested that Lady Stafford exerted undue influence over her daughter's feelings; but Laura herself, says her biographer, while allowing that "her parents had indeed selected the bridegroom, added frankly that she was quite free to say no, and would have said it if she had not cared for him very much."

"So, perfectly certain that obedience to her parents in this matter was right and pleasing to God, she utilised the short time at her disposal to fit herself by prayer and prudent counsel for the duties of this new phase of her life. The religious yearnings of childhood were to remain dormant for a time, since Divine Providence willed her to lead, for nigh upon twenty years, a life of Christian perfection in the world, preparing, albeit unconsciously, for the wider sphere of usefulness

which was to engross the second half of her earthly career."

Her husband was Mayor of York during the historic year 1830, when Brougham was Lord Chancellor and Viscount Palmerston was at the head of the Foreign Office. Both statesmen became intimate acquaintances of the Petres, and sought their joint counsel on current affairs, notably on the means of providing for the better education of the people.

"In congenial society," says Dr. Doyle, "Laura laughed heartily, but spoke little. Everyone liked to listen to her sensible remarks, and her opinions were usually correct. Her prudence and modesty equalled her wit; and Protestants and Catholics alike respected her as the embodiment of Christian wisdom. She had, moreover, a wonderful business capacity, and a remarkable cheerfulness—evidently the outcome of the pleasure she felt in making others happy. But reticence and discretion were her strong points. One is usually glad when a woman stops talking, but Laura spoke so little and so to the point that clever men liked to listen to her."

It was in 1830, that, "one day, when the Petres were dining with Lord Palmerston, Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg told Laura he had just been offered the Crown of Belgium, and asked her opinion as to whether he should accept or decline. She advised him to accept, and spoke so sensibly of the people he was called to govern that we may well believe that her words had some influence on his decision. She was afterwards an appreciated guest at the Court of Laeken, and at a much later date we meet Leopold again, in the convent parlour at Namur, chatting pleasantly with her of old friends

in his English days, and of his plans for the welfare of the nation whose choice he justified throughout a long and prosperous reign."

We must pass over the events of the years which followed, only stopping to note the memorable audience with Pius IX in 1846, when the saintly Pontiff assured her that as a nun she would one day render great service to the Church in England. Two years later her husband died, and, says her biographer:

"Immediately after the 'Month's Mind,' she went down for three days to New Hall. In that birthplace of her early ideals, always redolent to her with holiest memories of her girlhood, she renewed the vow of Chastity which she may have taken in the first hours of her bereavement, or perhaps conditionally in her husband's lifetime. Mother Clifford was dead, but many of the Community had been her former mistresses or playmates, and it was pleasant once again to meet them under the grand old trees, or to join in their devotions when they filed into church, the whiteness of their pleated surplices and flowing trains just relieved by the eight-pointed Cross in crimson cloth.

"It was not, however, the beauty or the allusiveness of their costume which had chiefly awakened Laura's girlish enthusiasm in the past; it was the peace, the happiness, the aroma of holiness about the place. All these advantages had still their high place in her esteem—nay, she realised their value better after her experience of life in the world. But her lines were not to be cast in this pleasant place. In a convent of contemplatives there was not sufficient scope for that active co-operation in works of mercy which was an instinctive craving of her nature. Moreover, there is a tradition at New Hall

that our Holy Father Pius IX had explicitly told her that she was to serve God in one of the more modern Congregations. . . . She was now thirty-seven years of age, in the prime of her beauty, and mistress of a fairly large fortune. She was too prudent to speak prematurely of her desire to embrace the religious life; but quietly—and her charities furnished her with plenty of occasions—she made herself acquainted with the scope and spirit of most of the convents in England.”

We have seen in the previous chapter how during their time of trial at Penryn our Lady had consoled her Sisters by the miraculous cure of Sister Marie Alix, to whom she had revealed the vocation to the Institute of Notre Dame of an English lady “very pleasing in God’s sight,” who was to “procure therein great glory to God.” This lady proved to be the Hon. Mrs. Petre, who received the habit of Notre Dame with the name of Sister Mary of St Francis, at Namur, on November 21, 1850. Again we pass rapidly over much that is interesting in her biography: her fervent novitiate; her being entrusted by the Reverend Mother General, almost from the outset, with the business affairs of England; Cardinal Wiseman’s letter of congratulation on her choice of the religious state, and his advice as to the direction of her energies:

“The greatest work possible of charity,” wrote His Eminence, “is to provide education for the very poorest classes—and with regard to poor girls, religious institutions can alone do the work effectually. God grant that you may be able to co-operate in this holy work !” How efficaciously she did co-operate will only be known on the last great day; but even now it may

be read in the annals of the English convents she helped to found or to maintain, notably in the Mount Pleasant Training College, where in convent chapel and college library is recorded the grateful testimony of Sisters and students.

We have given this short sketch of her career so that our readers may the better realise our contention that a vocation to Notre Dame is simply a call to the individual soul to carry out as perfectly as possible God's design in its creation, and that there is room in the Congregation for a great variety of talents and temperaments. All postulants, however, must possess or be able to acquire, as we love to repeat, the characteristic virtue of simplicity, and be in the first place women of prayer. It seems scarcely necessary to call attention to the high degree in which Sister Mary of St Francis possessed these qualities even before her entrance into religion. Her daily life gave sufficient proof of her constant loving dependence on God and her transparent singleness of purpose. We shall confine ourselves to quoting from her instructions to the novices at Namur, spoken always so simply and sweetly out of the abundance of her heart. In doing so we shall be ringing the changes on the old theme; but we shall be also reminding our readers that the spirit of Notre Dame is always the same. Speaking of the intimate union with God which that spirit supposes, she said:

“Our life is active and contemplative. About the active part we need not trouble overmuch; it comes easy enough and depends more or less upon circumstances. Not so the contemplative part. That requires real steady effort; not such strenuous effort as will unduly tax our minds, but quiet, persistent, earnest



effort which slowly, but very certainly, will win for us in time the true interior spirit.

“What have we to live for but God? Why have we given up everything and entered religion, if not to devote ourselves wholly to God’s service? It is sweet to think that he is always with us, loving us, and sharing our joys and griefs. When I consider all that he is to each of us, I wonder how any of us can bear to forget him for a moment. He is to be our only happiness, our every happiness in eternity. Why not now begin to think of him, love him, and give him glory, as it will be our delight to do in heaven?”

“Worldly people in all they do are seeking personal satisfaction or some temporal success. We have a nobler aim. We should therefore never be too much engrossed in our occupations, but keep the best part of ourselves—our higher powers of mind and heart—for God only. We should lend ourselves to our daily work, quietly and sweetly doing our little best, and leaving the issue in the hands of our loving Father, without anxiety or fear of failure. Let us often pause in the midst of our duties to ask his blessing on us and on our work, so that it may be all for his greater glory. We shall not ask alone. Our Blessed Lady is our Mother and our Patroness. Let us always remember that, and keep imploring throughout the day her help, her guidance, her efficacious intercession.”

Once again we are shown that simple union with God in the inner sanctuary of the soul is the secret of a real and fruitful vocation to Notre Dame. Laura Stafford-Jerningham had begun this life of union long before she entered religion. The following notes of another of her instructions will give some idea of the way

in which she practised it as Sister Mary of St Francis:

“However distracting may be the nature of our duties we must, as religious, keep closely united to God. As a good, solid foundation for this union, let us acquire the habit of recollecting his holy Presence at all times, of thinking to please him by our teaching or other work. This may be difficult at first, but habit overcomes habit, and in a short time we shall be sweetly rewarded by an unspeakable consolation.

“The corner-stone of this foundation, the first habit to be formed, is the secret of securing the early morning for God alone. Let us invariably give him this, without thinking or troubling about what comes after. We begin, on awakening, by offering him our hearts, all that we are, all that we have to do. We are careful while dressing to say the customary little prayers. Then comes our meditation, an hour wrapt up in God. Believe me, Sisters, the rest of the day depends upon our earnestness in this important duty. Never mind drowsiness or distractions, only let us always be careful about our preparation.

“Then follows the greatest of all actions—the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, when we are, as it were, on Calvary, and the Precious Blood of Jesus is flowing anew to wash away our sins and purify our souls. Then is the time of Holy Communion, when we may draw down abundant graces upon ourselves, our dear ones, the Institute and the whole Church. These first hours spent every morning with Jesus must be our harvest-time, when we store up graces against the needs of the day. When they are over, it is quite soon enough to trouble about the duties and cares of life.

“When the work of the day is ended we should fly to God in our evening meditation: yes, fly to Jesus, just as a little child flies to its mother from whom it has been for some hours separated. We should be so happy to be once more quite alone with our dear Lord, to have leisure to talk to him of all our struggles and sufferings and pleasures. Let us at that time fly to him and rest in him: for he is our Spouse, he loves us, he understands us, and he longs to help us with his Almighty Power.

“Oh, my dear Sisters, above all things else, take pains to cultivate the interior spirit. Guard it, foster it, and remember that God values more one interior soul than hundreds who are absorbed in works of mercy to the detriment of their own spiritual life. Let us keep vigilant guard over all our thoughts, words and actions. Everything that we do for God, how little soever in itself, is worth much; but all not done for him may be counted as dross, unprofitable to our own souls, and without any value in his sight.”

We could multiply counsels such as these given in general and in particular. We confine ourselves to a few instances of practical direction given at various times to beginners in the life of a Sister of Notre Dame:

“You find it hard to submit your will to that of another,” she said to a postulant, “but, my dear, do you not know the words of Holy Writ: ‘He that followeth his own will hath a fool for master’?”

“When we find anything seemingly too difficult,” she said to a novice, “let us remember the good old practice of doing all for God; it has brought us a great many graces, and with God’s help will bring us many more. Believe me, child, and be persuaded that among

the means which lead souls to perfection there is nothing better or more pleasing to God than a simple saying 'Yes' to his Holy Will, and a filial attention to his Presence."

Again: "The bad qualities we notice in others should serve not to weaken, but to strengthen and purify, our charity in their regard. Their virtue has its limits, the motive of our charity has none; for we love them as those whom God has put in his stead to be loved with a kindly, effective, all-embracing charity."

"To ponder on God's happiness, and to rejoice in it, is a good way to keep out thoughts of self. When there is such a grand subject to think about, how paltry seem the trifles that vex poor me."

"An infidelity puts a barrier between ourselves and God. Jump over it; he will be pleased to have you with him. If God were capable of sadness, he would grieve more at your aloofness."

"Let us keep close to our Lord, adoring, praising, thanking him; that is all we have to do."

"Do not make a fuss about little grievances. Pass them over as beneath your notice. You have your faggot of miseries to bear, and you increase the load by every additional misery you stoop to pick up. How much better it would be to lay it down at the foot of the Cross while you rest there to regain strength and courage."

"This difficulty is not to be admitted into the private parlour of your mind. When you hear its knock, send down word, 'I am otherwise engaged just now, and you need not trouble to call again.' Then mount higher. 'My God, thou hast permitted this trial, it is well.

I offer it to thee.' Renew this offering each time the bitter memory returns."

"A religious will never attain her true end, if she ceases to be a living victim, ever immolated to God in reparation for the outrages he receives in the world."

We have given more than sufficient proof that Sister Mary of St Francis, great as were her natural gifts, owed her true greatness to the supernatural use she made of them as a Sister of Notre Dame. She died in 1886, on the Feast of Corpus Christi, to which she had always a great devotion, between four and five in the afternoon during her Hour of Guard to which she was so faithful. She was succeeded as Superioress of the Namur Convent by Sister Marie Thérèsia, whose name, if less illustrious, still deserves a place in any record of those who have handed down with marked fidelity the primitive spirit of the Institute. The subjoined brief notice of her career is from the pen of Sister Mary of St Philip, written by request at the time of the death of Sister Marie Thérèsia, May 14, 1888.

"From the age of eighteen, when she left her bright and happy home in Brussels, Sister Marie Thérèsia had dedicated her life to the service of God in the education of youth as a Sister of Notre Dame. She had every gift in an exceptional degree which could fit her for gaining the hearts and forming the characters of those with whom she came in contact. Her first ten years of religious life were spent at the Mother House, Namur, where she was employed in teaching, and also in direction, as Mistress of Postulants. In 1852 she was sent to England to be Superioress of the convent and boarding school at Clapham. Under her active and intelligent superintendence this soon became a



most flourishing establishment. The stately buildings erected under her direction in the beautiful grounds on the Common bear testimony to her energy, her thoughtful arrangement, and her excellent taste.

“In 1859 Sister Marie Thérèsia was placed in charge of the convent, college, and schools of Mount Pleasant, Liverpool, and to her great joy she was brought into more immediate relationship with the poor. The work carried on in the training college had her fullest co-operation, and it is to her, under God, that the Institution mainly owes its success. Her large-minded generosity, her strong common sense, and her readiness to enter into any projects of improvement, made her administration singularly enlightened and free from narrowness, while her gentle, gracious manner and her wonderful tact and power of sympathy won her the hearts of both inmates and outsiders. Every department of the Mount Pleasant Schools felt her influence. The beautiful chapel, the practising schools, and the pupil teachers’ home were the first buildings she undertook to provide. Then came the high school for girls, in which she ever took a lively interest. But it always seemed as if her happiest working moments were spent among the poor. How many hours has she passed examining the children in the parish schools, hearing them read, correcting their written work, marking their ‘passes,’ and announcing the results on her return home to the mistresses.

“During the thirty-four years which she spent as a Superior in England Sister Marie Thérèsia had much work to do in connection with all the convents of the Order in this country. She conducted the negotiations in founding houses at St George’s Road, London, at

Stockport, Everton Valley, Birkdale, Waterloo, and Warrington; and it was especially in these undertakings that her wisdom and prudence were displayed. One of the priests who had business transactions of this kind with her wrote of his impressions in these words: 'She appeared to me to possess qualities not often found in the same individual. She was a thorough religious, pious, devoted, ever alive to, and ever mindful of, the spirit of her Order and its duties. Again, her judgement and prudence and foresight and common sense—how strong they were, and how evident to anyone and everyone who ever had to consult with her on matters of business. I never can forget how much I have been struck by this prudence and foresight and shrewd sense in the negotiations I have had with her.'

"In June, 1886, on the death of Sister Mary of St Francis (Hon. Mrs. E. Petre), who, as the assistant of the Mother-General, had had the direction of the English convents of Notre Dame, the Superior of Mount Pleasant was sent for to take her place at Namur. In this capacity her sphere of labour was greatly enlarged, though it was less active, most of her work being done by correspondence. However, she was able to spend nearly three months in England during the summer of 1887, visiting on behalf of the Mother-General the twenty convents of the Order, and encouraging by her ready sympathy and her wise counsels the various educational works carried on by the Sisterhood.

"Of her inner life this is not the place to speak, but those who had the happiness of living under her peaceful sway knew full well the source whence she derived her self-sacrificing zeal, her devotion to duty, and her

tender consideration for those around her. It was the beautiful soul living very near to heaven in the calm regions of faith and prayer that made her very presence a sunshine, and intercourse with her a kind of spiritual education. 'Such a woman,' one of the chief inspectors, a Canon of the Established Church, said, 'ought never to die'; and in truth her passing away is no ending of that gracious life. Her real life has begun, and from her home in heaven she will continue the work God gave her to do on earth."

## CHAPTER VI

### ANOTHER INSTANCE OF THE APOSTOLIC LIFE OF THE SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME

“Quoniam Tu, Domine, singulariter in spe constituisti me.”

PSALM iv.

**T**HIS was the keynote of the life of Frances Mary Lescher, bequeathed to her by the dying lips of her saintly mother. Though but a child at the time, her mind could grasp the significance of the motto, *Singulariter in spe*, which her father then made his own. As the years passed, she realised more and more fully all that it meant to be established in hope by God alone; and she went steadily on her way *semper sperans, semper gaudens*. Throughout many years of Apostolic service, “in knowledge, in long-suffering, in sweetness, in the Holy Ghost, in the word of truth, in the power of God, by the armour of justice on the right hand and on the left” (2 Cor. vi), she was true to her trust.

Born in London on May 8, 1825, she was not yet five years of age when her father moved his home to the neighbourhood of Epping Forest. The eldest of his seven children, she inherited his strength of purpose and intellectual vigour. He was a staunch adherent of the ancient faith and an open observer of its practices, in days when the Catholics of England had scarcely begun to realise their emancipation. When he brought his family to London in 1845, it was a model household, at the head of which Frances was well fitted to take

her place. At fourteen years of age she had brought home the gold medal, the highest distinction awarded in her school at Newhall, and had then become her father's companion and pupil. She had walked and ridden with him through the beautiful country by which her girlhood's home was surrounded. She had read with him the classics and the best English authors. Skilful teachers had cultivated her talents for music, drawing, and foreign languages. She played well upon the harp, and could make a correct sketch from nature; she read Italian with ease and spoke French fluently. Travels in Europe with her father had widened her mental horizon, and intercourse with men and women of sound judgement and good taste had helped to make her a type of Wordsworth's

Perfect woman, nobly planned  
To warn, to comfort and command.

For, with all her intellectual power and stores of learning, Frances Lescher was by no means a "blue-stock-ing," or a literary lady whose genius and acquirements kept lesser lights at a distance. There was a story sometimes told against her of how in her school days she had sent to her father, on his birthday, a poem composed by herself, and how he had sent her in return a ball of worsted wherewith to mend stockings. But he treasured the poem, nevertheless, and, as we have seen, gave his gifted daughter ample opportunities for developing her romantic tastes, while insisting on the acquisition of solid learning and the due fulfilment of feminine duties. The depth of her affections, her lively imagination and power of sympathy, her sense of humour, and above all, her faith, her supernatural



outlook, and her tender piety, clothed her soul in that garment of "strength and beauty" assigned by the Book of Wisdom to the valiant woman.

Hers was always a well-filled and well-ordered day. Her sister Annie, though not much more than a year her junior, always looked up to her with admiring affection, and faithfully followed her lead. Together they shared the duties and pleasures of the best London society of their day. Together they provided for the good entertainment of their father's guests and visitors, among whom were to be counted members of some of the oldest Catholic families in England, with some of the most distinguished new fruits of the Oxford Movement. There were house parties, and banquets, and balls; but there were also visits to the poor in their homes, teaching of Catholic doctrine and practice not only at the Sunday School, but in their own house, and attendance at such meetings or lectures as were calculated to promote the well-being of their fellow-citizens. But their happiest hours were passed in the London Oratory, where they heard Mass daily and received Holy Communion very frequently; where they listened eagerly to the eloquent sermons of Father Faber, and joined heartily in the singing of his beautiful hymns. The day was not far off when each of them was to realise that she must be indeed "All for Jesus."

The younger sister was the first to hear the decisive call of her Divine Lover to follow him in the religious state. She felt naturally drawn to the peace of a purely contemplative life; but her director showed her the crying need in England for Apostolic women and her own power to help in supplying that need. By his advice she sought admission to the Congregation of Notre Dame.

Frances realised all that the sacrifice of her sister's companionship would mean for her; but she generously set aside all thought of self and made the necessary preparations for Annie's departure, with unshaken trust in God. She accompanied her father and sister to the Mother House of Notre Dame at Namur, and was so consoled by all that she witnessed there that she wrote to an intimate friend: "It is certainly the most perfect convent I ever saw, and the nuns the very nicest. They are so simple and natural and so full of charity." She was at once penetrated and charmed by the spirit of Blessed Julie's Institute, which harmonised so completely with her own straightforward, generous disposition. After her return to London she paid frequent visits to the Convent of Notre Dame at Clapham, and as she realised how wonderfully the Sisters there managed to keep their hearts with Mary at the Master's feet, while head and hands were busily employed in his service, she grew more and more convinced that their Apostolic life was meant to be her own. Two years later we find her in the novitiate at Namur, as Sister Mary of St Philip.

She entered upon her period of probation with that singleness of purpose which characterised her. She passed through it with the eyes of her soul fixed on Jesus and Mary. When her daily duties seemed trivial or hard, she went in spirit to Nazareth. When the unexpected news of the vocation of her youngest sister, Agnes, whom she had counted upon as remaining at home to be her father's companion and solace, came to raise the question in her mind and heart: Ought she not to sacrifice her own vocation for his sake? she took her stand beside the Mother of Sorrows. She

forgot her people and her father's house, and the King greatly desired her beauty.

Meantime the need in England of a training college for Catholic teachers was being insistently brought forward. The Sisters of Notre Dame were asked to undertake its foundation and direction, and through the unerring ways of Divine Providence, Sister Mary of St Philip was appointed to be, under God and our Lady, the mainspring of its success. She was professed at Namur on the feast of the Stigmata of St Francis, September 17, 1855. On October 17 following she was sent to the Convent of Mount Pleasant, Liverpool, to begin the work. Events moved rapidly. Government examinations were brilliantly passed, certificates were obtained from the Board of Education, the college buildings began to rise, and the first students took temporary possession of rooms in the convent on the feast of our Lady's Purification, 1856.

We are not concerned here with the phenomenal growth of the work then begun at Mount Pleasant. It is well known on both sides of the Atlantic. What we wish to bring home to the minds of our readers is the fact that, while head of the college for nigh half a century, the inner life of Sister Mary of St Philip was that of a simple Sister of Notre Dame. She brought to the Congregation exceptional gifts of mind and heart which had been so carefully cultivated that she would have been distinguished in any career she had chosen. She continued to cultivate them, and to use them in the Apostolic life she had embraced for God's greater glory and the good education of girls. She became known inside and outside the convent as one of the wisest and best of teachers. During the early years,

when the college staff was small, she toiled early and late to make good all deficiencies. She might be seen at any free moment in a corner of the lecture room revising the written work of a student seated beside her; or she might be met with in the children's playground talking to a little girl whom she had singled out as the owner of some natural gift to be specially developed. She made herself all to all that she might win all to Christ. Her words were always uplifting; but her students grew to value most the morning meditation made aloud by her for the children of Mary in the Lady Chapel, or the familiar evening talk on topics of the day in the recreation room. There were rambles through woods, and walks by the shore, which left most happy and holy memories behind. There were feast-day celebrations which made the social life of the college so high-toned. There were solemn words of counsel and warning given in season, which could never be forgotten.

Until 1886 Sister Mary of St Philip, while at the head of the college and its very life, was herself under obedience to the Sister Superior of the convent. She was always a model of deference and submission; and the cordial union which existed between Sister Marie Thérèsia and herself was evident to all. When the former was recalled to Namur, a heavy burden fell upon the shoulders of Sister Mary of St Philip. She proved herself equal to the task. While retaining all her interest in the college, she gave herself wholeheartedly to the Community over which she was placed. She assured the Sisters employed in domestic work that she would henceforth "think as much of brooms as of books." She kept constantly before all the example

of the first Mothers and Sisters, and she spared no pains to preserve the primitive spirit. She herself seemed to carry out to the letter the injunction given in the Constitutions of Notre Dame that "the Sisters must imitate their glorious Mother the most pure Virgin Mary and live and breathe but for their heavenly Spouse." Her reverent attitude and profound recollection before the Blessed Sacrament bore witness to her living faith in the Real Presence. Her childlike devotion to Mary seemed to increase with every month of May, every feast-day of our Lady. Sisters and students alike shared her enthusiasm when there was question of a torchlight procession in honour of our Lady of Dolours, or a pilgrimage to the shrine of our Lady of Perpetual Succour at Bishop Eton.

These were all outward signs. There was a secret chamber in her soul into which she could withdraw at any moment, and those who knew something of her inner life could tell how close was the union there maintained between Sister Mary of St Philip and the Lord who had espoused her to himself in faith. In her talks with the Community she unconsciously gave glimpses of this intimate union, and of the Source whence she derived all her sweetness, all her strength. We subjoin a few examples.

*Conference for the Eve of the Assumption*

"The Gospel of the Feast of the Assumption always strikes one as being something remarkable. The words of our Lord: 'Mary has chosen the better part, and it shall not be taken from her,' are applied to our Lady. We may apply them to ourselves, for we, too, have chosen the better part, or rather, our Lord has chosen it for



us. Yet it will not be the better part unless we make it so, unless we realise all that it means, and really feel that we have the better part. Sometimes we may enjoy other things—a little success, approbation, token of affection, or some such trifle, but if we seek our pleasure away from God then we do not realise our high vocation. Let us remember that ‘the better part’ for us is to have a great personal love of our Blessed Lord. Without this love we shall not go securely through our religious life. There are all sorts of difficulties which cannot be overcome except by this personal love of Christ. It is only this personal love that will help us to become saints. It is only when we fear wounding him in the least little thing, when we care about pleasing him, when we are bent upon offering him everything, when we are continually giving little things to him, that we are safe. Our holy Foundress reached a high degree of intimate union with our Lord, and if we have to live up to the standard of her Rule we, too, must cultivate the spirit of personal love of Christ.”

### *Of Familiar Intercourse with Christ*

“ Sometimes we do not sufficiently realise how much our Lord loves us, and how intimately we ought to know and love him in return. We must believe that he loves us individually, that he loves us in spite of our faults, that he really cares for us, and likes to have us near him. It is with our Lord even as it is with human love. He is very much disappointed when we do not care to converse with him, do not respond to his love. He cares for us more than any one else, for he made us, he redeemed us, and he knows every fibre of our being.

Those weaknesses which distress us he understands, and he alone has the power to set them right. We should, therefore, go to him to be cured of all our spiritual infirmities. Our Lord is hurt when we are wanting in confidence, when we do not give him our whole love and trust. He would be so pleased if we kept all our secrets for him. You know what we feel when a person says to us: 'Now I would not tell this to anyone else,' and we know that she really means what she says. How we appreciate this mark of friendship! So, when we go to our Lord, let us say to him: 'Dear Lord, I want to tell you my secrets, my troubles. I am going to tell you, and no one else.' If we go to him every time we want comfort and consolation instead of seeking creatures, we shall realise more and more that he is our friend, and gain a more personal love of him.

"Another practice which may help us is to have some mystery, or place, or time, where we agree to meet our Lord. At Nazareth, at Bethany, or in the Garden of Gethsemani, you can meet Jesus, converse with him, and console him. Or you may join the crowd at the Sermon on the Mount, you may sit with our Lord and the woman at the well, or you may follow the liturgy of the Church, and have different places for different seasons. But have some plan ready for that mystery or place where you would like to have met our Lord when he was on earth.

"You may help yourselves, too, by thinking of him, in his various relations to you—as Spouse, Friend, Brother, Guest, King. Some of you may choose to think of him as Master, because you need so much to be taught by him. Then you will repeat often to

yourselves: 'The Master is come and calleth for thee.'

"Remember, however, that an increase of intimacy with Christ means that we must be prepared for great sacrifices, yet it is well worth while to suffer much in order to increase our love for our Lord. If he wishes us to cling to his Cross, let us be ready for him, let us tell him that we will never count the cost of our trials if they but bring us closer to him."

### *Of Community Life*

"The spirit of the Church which should be, as it were, our guiding star through Lent is the spirit of penance. Every thought, word and act of ours should be impregnated with this spirit. 'A Bundle of Myrrh is my Beloved to Me'—that should be our device during Lent. And we should treasure that myrrh, taking all the sufferings that come to us as presents from the hand of our Lord and Spouse. At Easter he may give us roses and lilies if he will, but now he offers us myrrh, and we will stretch out our hands for it eagerly. We must enter upon this holy season with much courage, denying ourselves, controlling ourselves, and humbling ourselves. The very best means of doing these three things is by faithfully adhering to the practices of community life, and by living the common life in a cheerful and charitable spirit of penance. Let us ask ourselves from time to time three questions proposed by Father Dignam:

" 'Am I a means of sanctification to my Sisters?'

" 'Am I a source of happiness to them?'

" 'Is my work done for God alone?'

"As regards the first, we know that we ought to

advance every day in the knowledge and love of our Blessed Lord. This means that we shall imitate him, and thus begin to lead the lives of saints—acting up to their maxims, striving to attain their standard of virtuous living, never allowing ourselves to be mean or ungenerous in God's service. When, in preparing for Holy Communion, we ask our Lord to sanctify and make us holy, let us put all possible fervour into our petition, and ask him for nothing less than to become saints. We must be saintly ourselves if we would help others to be so. We must each bring our personal contribution to the sanctity and fervour of the house. We can all practise the religious *esprit de corps* by our good example, not that we should do things for the sake of edification, but we should remember that those who live with us are inevitably influenced by our actions, and we must realise the heavy responsibility which this places upon us. I have often noticed in myself that when I see a Sister doing something which costs much, or being faithful to some minor recommendation, I at once make a resolution to improve myself in that particular. Let us try in that way to help one another to become saints.

“Then comes the second question. To live together, and not try to make one another happy, would be a very serious thing. Of course, each one has her own character, her own angles and corners, and we must all try to fit in with them. Even among the saints there was often need for forbearance one with another. The great thing in religious life is to show great consideration for others in word and act, and not to expect consideration in return. When we awake each morning, after we have given our first thought to God, and have

placed ourselves in the Sacred Heart, our second thought might be: 'What shall I do today to make others happy?'

"So, too, 'Am I a means of peace?' What does this demand but the exercise of tender charity towards others? There are so many, thank God, who are indeed a source of happiness and peace to all around them, who do little kindnesses, who cover defects, who meet others half-way, who show by their very manner that they would do anything to help those with whom they live.

"Lastly comes the all-important question: 'Am I doing my work for God alone?' If we are, then our work will not interfere with our own perfection, or that of others. When we are working solely to please others, to advance our own cause, to do our own will, we are distressed and unhappy when we are thwarted or unsuccessful. We must always fear lest, after having entered religion to work for God alone, we may take back some of our offering, and spoil our work by some human motive, such as a desire for honour, praise or appreciation. We should offer our work to God frequently during the day, saying, 'For the love of thee,' or '*Fiat voluntas tua.*'

"Pray earnestly that we may be a most fervent Community, and that God will give to each Sister that grace which our Lord in his Passion suffered particularly to obtain for each of us. Ask that the Community may have the spirit of a very great love for him, the desire to suffer for him in a spirit of charity. There are some special graces that I wish to obtain for this Community—a supernatural tone—that we aim very high, that we realise that we must all be saints, that



we recognise that there can be no easy path for us on the road to sanctity, and that the edge of our tenderness of conscience with regard to vows and Rules be ever kept sharp and firm.

“Remember the words which our blessed Foundress once addressed to the Sisters at the beginning of Lent: ‘Vous pouvez toujours sans permission, discipliner votre volonté, faire taire votre jugement et opinion, et coucher vos sens sur la dure de la vie commune.’ Our work imposes certain limitations on our practice of exterior penance, but we must not limit in the same way our practice of interior mortification.”

Our last quotation shall be a sample of the love of Sister Mary of St Philip for our Lady—*Mater Amabilis*.

“The spirit which should animate us during the month of our Lady should be the threefold spirit of joy, peace, and sweetness.

“Joy in religion is a very holy and beautiful thing: it is the joy we take in all our occupations—the joy of our vocation. We must try from time to time to increase in ourselves our appreciation of our spiritual vocation as Sisters of Notre Dame, for I am sure that our Lady takes special interest and pleasure in the work of her own Sisters. Let us rejoice not only in the success of our work, but also in the failure and disappointment, since all brings us nearer to him. St Paul says, ‘Again I say, rejoice’; let us then show this holy joy by our demeanour, recalling the words of our holy Rule which remind us that our countenance should show joy rather than sadness. We should cultivate this spirit of joy not only for our own sake and our own perfection, but because it helps others to be happy too.

“Then there is PEACE. Our Lord said so often to

His Apostles: 'Peace be with you,' and he says it to us also, if we would but listen to him. When others annoy us or thwart our plans, he is quite near us, whispering, '*Pax vobiscum*,' and he will help us to keep our souls unruffled if we turn immediately to ask his aid. We must pray that we may all have this gift of peace, and we must also strive to banish all trouble from our minds, by trying not to have any disturbing note in our conduct which may annoy others.

"Lastly, we must cultivate SWEETNESS. Think of our Lady all this month as *Mater Amabilis*; she has many titles; some reveal her greatness and power—*Virgo Potens*, *Mater Admirabilis*, *Speculum Justitiæ*; but we will invoke her as our most amiable Mother, and we will make it our special care to honour her by our sweetness and amiability with those around us. There are sometimes little thorns that pierce others, and though we cannot always prevent the pain they inflict, yet by our sweetness and kindness we can always bring some alleviation."

## CHAPTER VII

### OTHER TYPICAL EXAMPLES—CONCLUSION

**M**OTHER JULIANA of Norwich, in the first of her *Revelations of Divine Love*, has an illuminating passage on the goodness of God, in which she says: "As the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skin, and the bones in the flesh, and the heart in the whole, so are we, soul and body, clad in the Goodness of God, and enclosed. Yea, and more homely: for all these may waste and wear away, but the Goodness of God is ever whole, and more near to us without any comparison: for truly our Lover desireth that our soul cleave to him with all its might, and that we be evermore cleaving to his Goodness." Blessed Julie Billiart most probably never even heard of the English anchoress, but she was akin to her in this clear conception of the essential goodness of God. It was the refrain of her life-song, of that canticle of praise ever welling up in her heart and constantly upon her lips: "Ah, qu'il est bon le bon Dieu !" The realisation of this truth would suffice, she affirmed, to convert a soul. Hence she taught her Sisters to be always on the lookout for some manifestation of God's goodness in his creatures, a faint reflection indeed, yet always a reflection, of his own essential goodness.

It is easy enough, in this fallen world of ours, to perceive the evil that lies on the surface of human life. Even the Saints have had visible imperfections; and, often enough, great qualities in those by whom we are

surrounded are overshadowed, to our weak mental vision, by their corresponding defects—but,

Evil in its nature is decay,  
And any hour can blot it all away,

so we record in these pages only examples of the good that has been observed among us. Not that we wish to mislead our readers into the conception that in the convents of Notre Dame there have never been instances of graces rejected, talents misused, wrong turnings from the straight path of perfection marked out by the Constitutions and traditions of the Congregation. But we feel it to be more in keeping with the Spirit of the Gospel to fix our gaze on the light rather than on the darkness. Therefore we only tell of those who, in spite of the weaknesses, even the vices, inherent in their nature, have pressed steadily onward, rising quickly when they fell, and redoubling their speed so as to reach the goal by the appointed hour.

We are perforce obliged to omit many more than we name, who have kept alive the primitive spirit among us, and who have added by their zeal to the treasures of our Congregation. For we are so bound together by the Spirit of the Institute that the good works of one may be shared in by all. Those who are employed directly in the work of education, as well as those who by their loving service of the Community and their intercessory prayer help on that work, may alike look forward with confidence to the reward promised to those that "instruct others unto justice." They shall "shine as stars for all eternity." In the preceding chapters we have pointed out several stars of the first magnitude. We could name many others clustering

about them, but are obliged to confine ourselves to a few from our own province.

Here an honoured place should be assigned to those "Sisters of the Infant Jesus" whose Community at Northampton was affiliated to our Institute in 1852. The beginnings of their Congregation were made at Nivelles, in Brabant, about the year 1835, under the direction of the Reverend Father Leblanc, S.J. Thirty years previously, that zealous and learned priest had been Rector of the College of the Fathers of the Faith in Amiens. It was to him that Père Varin had confided the interests of the Sisters of Notre Dame when he had himself been obliged to leave that city; and well did Père Leblanc fulfil the trust. He introduced Blessed Julie and her work to the Bishop of Ghent, who invited her to make a foundation in his diocese and furnished her with her first Flemish postulants. He entered fully into the plans of the Foundress for the development of the Congregation, and it was only when he had been removed from Amiens that she underwent the misunderstanding and persecution that ended in the transference of the Mother House to Namur. When, therefore, we find Père Leblanc, after many years, guiding the first steps of another little band of Apostolic women, we can well imagine that the Spirit with which he strove to animate them was none other than that which he had beheld producing such good fruit in the Sisters of Notre Dame. This may account for the facility with which the "Sisters of the Infant Jesus" at Northampton were merged into the Congregation of Notre Dame de Namur.

It was at the request of Dr. Wareing, Vicar Apostolic of the Eastern District, that in 1845 two members of



the Nivelles Community were deputed to make a foundation in his episcopal city. In little more than a year it was decided by their Ecclesiastical Superior, the Archbishop of Mechlin, that the Northampton Community should no longer be dependent on that of Nivelles for guidance or support. By the year 1850 this measure had been justified. The convent schools were in a flourishing condition, and the Sisters, moreover, had given instruction to more than 200 converts. Then came the trial which was eventually to lead to their affiliation to our Institute.

In 1851 typhus fever of a malignant kind broke out in the convent. The boarders were sent home, four of the Sisters died, and those who had not contracted the disease were dispersed for the time being. Only the Superioress remained to watch over the invalids, for whom secular nurses had been engaged. After three months, when the convent had been disinfected, the scattered Community came back and the schools were reopened. Great sympathy and substantial kindness on the part of Protestants as well as Catholics encouraged the Sisters to devote themselves with renewed ardour to the souls confided to their care. Circumstances arose, however, which made them feel the necessity of some experienced guidance in the difficulties by which they were surrounded. The Superioress and her Assistant decided to ask advice from the ex-Provincial of the Redemptorists, the Reverend Father de Held, then resident at Clapham. He happened to be away when they reached the monastery; but they were cordially received by the Rector. This was no other than our old friend Father de Buggenoms, who, as events were to prove, had been

chosen by our Lady to bring about their union with Notre Dame. By his advice, and with the approval of the Bishops of Namur and Northampton, the Community of the Infant Jesus asked for and received letters of affiliation from the Reverend Mother General, Mère Constantine, in the autumn of 1852.

Then it was that the spirit which animated the Northampton Community made itself evident, in the simplicity with which they recognised God's will in the change proposed to them, in the obedience with which they at once began to practise the Rules and customs of Notre Dame, and above all, in the cordial charity which bound each one of them to their new Superiors and Sisters. There were among them eleven professed religious who, while preserving their vows, passed humbly through a second novitiate. The Superioress, Sister Thérèse de Jésus, became at Namur Sister Thérèse du Saint Esprit, and, after renewing her vows as a Sister of Notre Dame, was sent to Mount Pleasant. There she was given the supervision of the younger day scholars, on whom she bestowed a mother's care. But her real life was truly hidden in God. In the Community she was looked upon as a saint. Her wonderful spirit of prayer and habitual recollection, her reverence for authority, and her joyous perseverance until death in a post so apparently beneath that in which she had first come to England, have earned for her the right to be remembered as a model Sister of Notre Dame.

Her assistant, Sister Jeanne de Jésus, was named Superioress at Mount Pleasant soon after the opening of the training college. Her gifts of mind and person were remarkable, and she was a striking example of the

way in which a true Sister of Notre Dame unites contemplation with action. Her health had never been robust, and at the beginning of 1859 she gave signs of much suffering and mental fatigue. Nevertheless she struggled bravely to fulfil the duties of her office. On the very day of her death, in spite of severe headache, she presided at the reunions of the Community, including the evening recreation, during which she was especially gay, with that spiritual sweetness which so greatly endeared her to her Sisters. After night prayers, when she had retired to her room, she felt a violent pain in her head which proved to be an attack of apoplexy. Sister Mary of St Philip at once sent for priest and doctor, and there was just time for Provost Cookson to give her the Sacrament of Extreme Unction, the last blessing and plenary indulgence, when she opened her eyes a little and calmly breathed her last. The sorrow felt by her Community was shared, not only by the pupils, but by many outside the convent. Dr. Goss, the Bishop of the diocese, wrote: "Her loss will be mourned by all Liverpool. In the hour of trial she was a prudent adviser, and in time of trouble a rock of defence." She was followed to her last resting-place at St Oswald's, Old Swan, by a funeral procession such as had never before been witnessed in Liverpool, including, in addition to priests and religious, the students, pupil teachers, and day scholars of Mount Pleasant, the children of the Catholic Orphanage, and eight hundred pupils from the elementary schools—a spontaneous tribute to her well-known love for the children of the poor.

Other holy and gifted religious of the Northampton Community were: Sister Ignatius, who died Superioress

of Clapham in 1886; Sisters Mary Stanislaus, Mary Juliana and Marie Thérèse (sister to the famous astronomer, the Rev. Stephen Perry, S.J.); and the two sisters by birth as well as by religious profession, Sisters Mary Joseph and Etheldreda, who died, the one at Northampton, the other at Clapham. They were distinguished types of those Sisters of Notre Dame, familiarly named "Officières," upon whose co-operation the happiness and success of a Community greatly depend. They laboured hard and prayed much. They were never known to refuse a service, or to render it ungraciously. Their one aim was to serve our Lord perfectly in the office of Martha, while keeping their hearts at his feet with Mary.

Another perfect "Officière" was Sister Catherine de Gênes. She belonged to a well-known Catholic family of Ghent, her brother being editor of *Le Bien Public*, and two of her sisters Carmelites. Educated by the Dames Anglaises of Bruges, she had come to England to join the Sisters of the Infant Jesus at Northampton, where a relative of hers was the Superioress. She was still a postulant there when the Community was affiliated to Notre Dame, and she received the habit at Namur. After her profession she was sent to Mount Pleasant. She gave French lessons to the day scholars; but her chief occupations were the care of the Sisters' refectory, and the supervision of the domestic work of the students. After her death, one of them wrote: "I shall never lose the impression made on me by the calm, sweet face of that dear Sister whom we used to call among ourselves 'Catherine of the Angels,' because she seemed to us so like one of them!" Another wrote: "How exact she was in fulfilling every duty, never late, never losing

a moment ! We used to say she was like a clock that never needed winding up." Yet another said: "Only at that solemn moment when the secrets of hearts are revealed will the influence for good exerted by the mere presence of Sister Catherine among the students be known." Yet she never held any conversation with them beyond that necessitated by her office. She showed them how to work, and she worked with them. She taught them how to overcome their dislike to labour, and to offer whatever was hard or disagreeable for the conversion of sinners or the relief of the suffering souls. Above all, she prayed for them, and there were those among them who felt that she had won for them the grace of a religious vocation. But they could not know the secret of her self-sacrificing life. It was revealed in the reply she made to a Sister, who asked her of what she was thinking when making one of her frequent visits to our Lord. "Ah !" she answered simply, "I was thinking what a happiness it would be to die for the Blessed Sacrament." After her recall to Namur in 1876, she used the comparative leisure which her failing health brought with it to enter still more deeply into the contemplative part of her vocation. She died on Low Sunday, April 4, 1880.

Sister Catherine's memory was long cherished at Mount Pleasant, especially by the younger members of the Community, to whom she endeared herself by her unselfish ways and her gaiety of heart. Three of them were her especial admirers—Sister Mary of St Wilfrid (Adela Lescher), Sister Mary of St Joseph (Mary Winfield), and Sister Mary Xavier (Sybil Partridge)—three elect souls, differing from each other in many ways, but at one in their pursuit of perfection. Sister



Mary of St Wilfrid was sent from Mount Pleasant in 1886 to be first mistress of the boarders of Clapham. Afterwards she was named Superioress of Everton Valley, whence she passed on to the particular orbit in which she was to shine. She became in Scotland what her illustrious cousin had been in England, the head and heart of a famous college. Educated by the Benedictine nuns of St Mary's Abbey, East Bergholt, where two of her cousins were Mother Prioress and Lady Abbess respectively, she might have passed into the cloister there, and spent her days contentedly in its atmosphere of tranquil praise. But she did a harder thing. She brought a cloistered spirit with her into the open fields of Notre Dame. She was one of the truest types of its Apostolic life.

Sister Mary of St Joseph became in 1888 head mistress of the Mount Pleasant College, where she loyally carried on the traditions begun by Sister Mary of St Philip. She had always been a perfect "second," and it was no small trial to her to act as "first." One of the Protestant inspectors was so struck by her gentle, sweet humility, that he could not forbear commenting upon it. The strength of her mind was equalled by the tenderness of her heart; and she literally wore herself out in the service of both the Sisters and the students.

Of Sister Mary Xavier we may perhaps say, as Wordsworth did of Faber when he became a clergyman, that a poet was lost to the world. Still, if the hours which Sybil Partridge might have devoted to establishing the fame of her muse were consecrated by Sister Mary Xavier to the right upbringing of the poorest of Christ's little ones, she nevertheless made glorious use

of her genius. Had she written but that one poem *Just for Today*, she would have earned the admiration and gratitude of many souls to whom it has brought unspeakable help and consolation. That this is true, not only of Catholic but also of non-Catholic lovers of that hymn, is proved by the repeated requests for permission to have it printed. Another well-known poem of hers, *Day and Night*, won the "Felicia Hemans Prize" in 1901 for the best lyric, both as to form and matter, submitted to the judges of the Liverpool University. But perhaps the three most beautiful of her hymns are those to the Sacred Heart, the Mother of Christ, and the English Martyrs. There is a pathos in the refrain of the last-named hymn which expresses two characteristics of its writer—personal love of Jesus and zeal for the conversion of England:

Martyrs of England! keep us true,  
 True to Jesus, whate'er the pain.  
 Martyrs of England! we look to you:  
 Win our country to Christ again.

Not by her hymns alone, however, not by her masterly lectures and writings on the teaching of English, but by her steady perseverance in the simple, obedient, self-sacrificing life of a Sister of Notre Dame, did Sister Mary Xavier merit her place in "the city where the files are crowned." She must have received a loving welcome there from Blessed Mère Julie of whom she wrote so well and at whose beatification in St Peter's she was privileged to be present. We quote from her description of that never-to-be-forgotten event:

"On the feast of St Joseph, 1906 (was not the date, perchance, another delicate attention of Divine Providence, linking together in the joyful reaping names

long linked in the sorrowful sowing ?), appeared the Decree of Beatification, and the ceremony at St Peter's was fixed for the 13th of the following May.

"The 13th of May dawned fair and beautiful in the Eternal City. The Mass was fixed for 9.30, but it was not yet nine when seven Sisters of Notre Dame crossed the sunlit piazza of St Peter. High up over the great central entrance to the basilica hung a large piece of drapery; this veiled a picture of the new Beata much resembling the Apotheosis within the Church, and to be uncovered at the same moment. Beneath this, but under the portico and immediately over the great bronze door, was a large gilt-framed picture of Blessed Julie succouring the soldiers wounded at Waterloo. On either side this was flanked by Latin inscriptions. On the right:

"France, which brings up great souls, hath introduced among the citizens of heaven Julie Billiart. O Daughter, look down from heaven upon thy mother, and preserve her strong in that faith of Christ whence throughout all the ages she hath drawn the dignity of her name."

On the left:

"By Decree of the Supreme Pontiff, Pius X, the honours of the Blessed in Heaven are adjudged to Julie Billiart, Mother and Patroness of the Sisters of the august Mother of God. Hasten, ye Citizens and ye Strangers, to do honour to this Heroine distinguished by her virtues."

Hasten, also, we would add, all ye who aspire to a place in the "Glorious Company of Notre Dame" in heaven, hasten, "to make straight steps" along the path marked out for her daughters by Blessed Julie.

Ye are the children of saints. Let not the story of their lives be forgotten among you, or their memory left unhonoured. Let "Simplicity, Obedience, and Charity" be your watchword, and the thought of the goodness of God the unfailing source of your courage and confidence. Let Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament be your joy and your strength, and Mary Immaculate your "Mother, your Advocate, and your Protectress with God."









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